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THE CAST-IRON DUKE

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TO-MORROW AND TO-MORROW . . .

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SHEILA INTERVENES

THE RELUCTANT LOVER

BY INTERVENTION OF PROVIDENCE

TEX: A CHAPTER IN THE LIFE OF ALEXANDER

TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS

WHILE I REMEMBER

THE CAST-IRON DUKE

By
STEPHEN McKENNA



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TO
THE COUNTESS OF LISBURN

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

SKETCH OF A NOBLEMAN

I

THE penultimate match of the Grasshoppers' annual tour was ending in an inevitable draw. For two days the batsmen on either side had done what they pleased with the bowling; and now at half-past five, with six wickets to fall, a hundred and eighty runs to get and only an hour more to play, Colonel Steeping lost interest in the game and mounted to the visitors' changing-room of the Fernley pavilion.

"If I were you, Camelford," he told his wicket-keeper, "I should take first turn at the shower. Then you'll be ready to start with me as soon as stumps are drawn. It's a longish drive to Moulton; and the old boy will have my blood if we're late for dinner. His Grace of Leominster . . . It's very decent of him to put us up and all that sort of thing. At the same time . . ."

The captain of the Grasshoppers smiled wily and mixed himself a whiskey-and-soda with the air of a man preparing for action: he had no wish to dishearten his last-joined subaltern, but he was too honest or too sensible to pretend that a baptism of fire was a universally pleasant experience.

"Who nicknamed him 'the Cast-Iron Duke'," enquired Arthur Camelford, tossing his pads into a disintegrating cricket-bag and beginning to strip.

Colonel Steeping, who had already changed into a grey-

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flannel suit, dropped heavily into a groaning basket-chair and looked down through the open window of the sun-blistered pavilion on the half-loaded motor-coach that was to carry the rest of his men into Herefordshire. To the duties of captain and secretary he added those of baggage-master and transport-officer, calling periodical rolls, counting elusive suit-cases and digging errant chauffeurs from remote public-houses.

"I should think it's nearly as venerable as he is," he answered, when at last he had succeeded in catching the charabanc-driver's eye. "If I don't tell this imbecile the way, I know he'll go wrong. . . . Yes! And, when I say 'venerable', I *mean* 'venerable'. The sort of man you won't see again, though he's quite likely to outlast us both. Good Heavens, I've been skippering this side ever since the armistice, which is twelve years ago now, and I don't believe he's added a wrinkle . . . Well hit, sir! A boundary! . . . Time standing still, you know, and death passing him by . . . You'll soon see why he's called cast-iron, my boy!," Steeping chuckled maliciously. "He'll make you feel like one of your own little pupils at Brampton. There's morning and evening chapel; and I honestly believe he'd send you up to be swished if he caught you smoking except in the appointed place and at the appointed time. D'you feel you can face up to that?"

Arthur refrained from comment until he had stood, gasping, for two minutes under the shower. As the latest recruit to the Grasshoppers, he had learnt to walk warily when his seniors described the strange ways of the houses which he was being taken to visit. At one, they assured him, the youngest bachelor was expected to say grace; at another he must be ready to converse with his hostess in French.

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"I suppose my tastes are low," he answered, towelling vigorously, "but I should have thought you'd have been better-off at the local pub."

Colonel Steeping folded his hands over an ample paunch and yawned complacently.

"The old man does you very well," he replied; and the relish in his voice hinted that his own nickname of Gin-Fizz might not be undeserved. "He'd be frightfully cut up, too, if the Grasshoppers didn't stay at the castle for the last match of their tour. They always have, since his grandson—young Knighton—played for me; therefore, they always must. As for the local pub. idea, I don't suppose you'd be taken in. The old boy owns everything and everybody as far as the eye can see; and I should think he could make himself most infernally unpleasant if any one crossed him. There was a farmer who was supposed to have poisoned one of his hounds in the dark ages; he had him thrashed within an inch of his life. And it's generally believed that he killed a man in a duel about a woman. You'll find it's an experience to stay with him. And, if you remember all the time that you've dropped back into the eighteenth century, when territorial magnates really *were* territorial magnates, you'll get on all right. He keeps the best port in England, as I have good reason to know, and drinks a bottle of it to his own cheek every night of his life. More power to him!"

The speaker sighed, as though he lamented his own inability to observe this heroic tradition, and stroked his pendulous blue chaps. A wine-merchant by trade, Steeping made a pleasure of his business and a business of his pleasure, stocking the cellars of the houses where he came to play cricket in the summer and drinking his own choicest vintages when he returned to shoot in the

autumn. Every acquaintance became a customer, every customer a friend; and the embarrassment of doing business with a guest was overcome by the guest's appearance, which demanded that the conversation should sooner or later concern itself with eating and drinking. To thousands who had never seen him, the bulbous nose and protuberant blue eyes of Lieutenant-Colonel Harrison Steeping, as he warmed a *verre-de-balon* in vast, hairy paws, had been made familiar by the caricaturists of the last twenty years.

Wrapping himself in a towel, Arthur Camelford strolled to the window and began to dress. Half-hearted Fernley cheering indicated that another wicket had fallen, but there was so little chance of victory that all those of the visiting side who had already batted were now coming up to change. To the essentially English, summer smell of tobacco, shandygaff and new-mown grass there was now added a smell of linseed oil and pipe-clay. Every one jostled every one else away from the one shower and the two looking-glasses. Every one talked at once. Every one complained that every one else was taking up too much room.

"Thirty dozen of port a year . . .," Arthur began to calculate. "Hi! That's my comb!"

"Multiplied by about eighty," Steeping added. "I should think he was weaned on it . . ."

"Is this the old duke you're talking about, Gin-Fizz?," enquired Wilson, the first-change fast bowler. "I don't mind what he drinks, but I *do* get rather bored when he begins talking about all the women he's loved and lost. Who's stolen my soap? Other men's mistresses, especially when they were dead before I was born . . ."

"There's something rather magnificent about the old

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sinner," drawled Rashleigh, the chief run-getter of the side. "I understand that all his bastards are called Fitz-Moulton."

"And their mothers were all treated as morganatic wives," said Steeping. "The grand style in everything. By the way, you brought a long coat with you, Camel? Good! It's best war-paint all the time."

Arthur retreated with his suit-case to a corner of the now congested changing-room and considered which of his clothes would make the least unfavourable impression on the Duke of Leominster and his party. As an assistant master at a public school, he had little money to spare for his wardrobe; and, though he travelled and lived free on tour, the "experience" of being entertained at Moulton Castle threatened to prove a costly one in tips and clean shirts.

"What does the party consist of?," he asked Steeping at the end of an examination which convinced him that some of his clothes were worse than others but that none were good. "Do the Quidnuncs stay there too?"

"Yes. And there'll be a fair sprinkling of family. The duchess, you'll find, is stone-deaf; you're not expected to do more than shake hands with her. I'm not ragging," Gin-Fizz protested. "Lady Rhayader acts as hostess. She's the daughter-in-law. Well, then there's Lady Knighton, who married Rhayader's eldest son . . ."

"If you've not met her, Camel," interposed Rashleigh, "I predict that you'll quite certainly fall in love with her. Every one of your age does."

"She had Moulton and the other boy with her last year," Gin-Fizz continued. "Quite a patriarchal little gathering, what? Four generations . . ."

"It sounds like the A.A. recommended route to mid-

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Wales," Arthur observed. "Leominster, Rhayader, Knighton. Turn left for Devil's Bridge before you get to Aberystwyth . . . I shall be entirely out of my element."

"Well, we all have to be rather on our best behaviour," Gin-Fizz admitted, "but it's really something not to be missed. If you can tell your grandchildren that you stayed at Moulton in the last days of the great duke . . . How much longer are you likely to be?"

Arthur strapped his bag and beckoned from the window to the waiting chauffeur.

"Ready now!," he answered. "It sounds as if it might be rather fun. I suppose, when the present man goes, all the eighteenth-century business will go with him . . . You can't imagine a new man carrying on that sort of thing, any more than you can imagine any one copying Lonsdale's yellow wagonettes and postilions . . ."

"I'm not so sure. The old boy has created something of a tradition in the last sixty years. And the others have been well schooled in it. Certainly it's the kind of immortality he'd *like* to secure. Leave out Rhayader, who's an invalid, and take Knighton, who's about your age, Camel: he and young Moulton between them can fairly look forward to preserving the tradition for another sixty years. That will see both of *us* out. A remarkable thing, you know, to leave your personal stamp on the domestic history of England for a century and a quarter. And, consciously or unconsciously, that's what the old man's out to do."

From Fernley, on the western borders of Gloucestershire, across a northerly strip of Monmouthshire, the car mounted

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the valley of the upper Wye and headed, in the eye of the sun, for the mid-Welsh mountains. Somewhere, Arthur told himself as he explored the map, at the meeting of Herefordshire and Shropshire, the last and greatest of all the fortresses in the Marches would be found at Moulton; and somewhere in the castle, if the picturesque accounts of the others were to be believed, the last and greatest of English feudal lords sat waiting to do battle with an encroaching host of manufacturers and shopkeepers, in a world of universal suffrage and cheap newspapers, of scepticism and equality. They were still discussing him—Wilson, Rashleigh and the others—when stumps were drawn: arguing about his age, imitating his archaisms of speech and exchanging confessions of their own narrow escapes from his vigilance and quick wrath.

“If you have any hints for a good eighteenth-century manner,” Arthur told his companion, “now’s the time.”

“I think the atmosphere of the place is your best help,” Gin-Fizz replied. “I don’t know that I’m more of a snob than my neighbour, but I should never shock the old gentleman’s ears by admitting that our friend Wilson is on the stock exchange. We dwell on my military rank and tacitly ignore the Saint James’ Street business. It’s no good explaining that society has become rather less exclusive in the last eighty years. I don’t think he can forgive Lady Knighton for having a ‘colonial’ mother, though the Pryors are every bit as old a family as the Moultons. ‘Colonial’, by the way, is what you would call American, but I don’t think the duke has ever recognized the revolution.”

“Then you’d better stress the fact that I’m a captain in our O.T.C.,” said Arthur. “If you tell him that I’m an usher . . .”

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"You'll rank with his chaplain. Above the salt. Which is more than he would concede to Farmer, who's a mere attorney or Bobby Larkin, who's only a leech. Oh, you'll be all right."

Arthur put away his map and surrendered to the pleasure of musing with complete contentment on the rightness of the world in general and, in particular, of the place which he had the luck to occupy in it. His profession had been called "the worst paid and most richly rewarded"; and, after holding two fiery catches, making thirty-eight runs and stumping the most formidable stonewaller of the Fernley side, he felt disposed to dwell on the rewards and forget the handicaps of a schoolmaster's life. For a third of the year his time was his own. Every winter he spent three weeks in Switzerland; every summer he toured for a month; and for the rest of his holidays he could live economically with his widowed mother and unmarried sister in Leamington. They were always glad to see him, but—like his soldier brother and his clergyman brother and his eldest sister, who had married a publisher—they were too much wrapped up in their own affairs to make demands on him.

At times, indeed, Arthur could have wished that, as a family, they were all rather less detached. The common-room at Brampton, where nobody cared if he lived or died so long as he did his work and let his colleagues do theirs, seemed a sufficiently bleak, unfriendly escape from his two lonely little rooms in the cloisters; but the house in Leamington breathed an air of equal indifference and he moved to and fro at the beginning and end of his holidays with an odd feeling that no one greatly wanted him. Maybe, if family ties had been stronger, he would have been the less his own master; but really it was only under

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the roofs of strangers like his hosts of the last few weeks that he felt at home. For some reason or other—perhaps his mere capacity for enjoying himself!—people seemed to like him and were always telling him that he must come back without waiting for the Grasshoppers' next tour. Gin-Fizz had intimated that they all wanted him to be a regular member of the side; and the others were always chaffing him about his "social success". Well . . . It had been good fun! He was not, Arthur knew, bad-looking; he could hold his own at most games; he gave himself no airs. And he always pulled his weight in a party where there was any singing or dancing or dressing-up.

Not that there was likely to be much frivolity of that kind at Moulton Castle! So far as he could recall, the only person less than about ninety was somebody's half-American wife at whose feet they were all expected to prostrate themselves.

"I suspect this is going to be a sticky show, Gin-Fizz," he observed with a return of his former uneasiness, as the car left the high-road.

"There's the castle!," Steeping exclaimed. "Another ten minutes or so . . ."

Arthur looked down a ride cut in the woods to their right and caught a glimpse of crenellated walls ending in four squat towers. The stone was flushed with the setting sun; and the windows sparkled as though a gigantic fire were blazing behind them. Then the trees blotted out the view once more.

"It looks an enormous great place . . ."

"About the size of Windsor," said Steeping. "And though I've not had the honour of staying with His Majesty, I bet the king himself is no more regal than the

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old duke. D'you remember two of Max's cartoons," he drawled, "one with an old-English grandee shewing himself at his window because the mob like that sort of thing? "

"And the other with the modern variety keeping well away from the window because the modern mob quite definitely doesn't like that sort of thing? "

"They were good so far as they went," said Gin-Fizz, "but I want a third, shewing the type that doesn't care a curse what anybody likes. If you've never met any one of whom you feel quite sure that 'God would think twice before damning a man of his quality', I believe you'll meet him in five minutes' time."

Arthur put on his hat and began to dust his coat. The countryside in the last few miles had undergone a subtle change which hinted at the proximity of a great house and an autocratic landlord: the cottages were in sounder repair, the hedges were better trimmed and even the trees had an air of being sternly tidied. Labourers at work in their gardens paused to touch their hats in deference to a car obviously bound for the castle; and, when Gin-Fizz himself began to reveal signs of apprehension, it was no longer possible to paint a reassuring picture of the "Cast-Iron Duke" as a mild and toothless old gentleman with a bath-chair and a foible for hospitality.

"I doubt if he can be more intimidating than Dr. Irving, my august headmaster," Arthur comforted himself. "I lived in terror of him till I found he played worse bridge than I did. For all I know, the duke may have some vulnerable spot . . ."

"If he has, nobody's succeeded in discovering it," Gin-Fizz returned drily. "I regard that as the peculiar beauty of his name. You might conceivably *crack* him, but as

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for denting or bending . . . I suppose you're aware that you've lost nearly all the skin off your nose."

Arthur bent forward to examine his reflection in a narrow strip of looking-glass. His brown eyes were still strained from a long morning behind the wickets and one cheek-bone had been bruised by a bumping ball, but his face was clean and his abundant black hair smooth. Designed on generous lines with a square-bridged nose and a big, good-humoured mouth, he looked what he privately held that every man should be: an intelligent, well-groomed animal in superb condition and with an unruffled temper.

"It's the same old face I've had for thirty-three years," he answered. "A little superficial wear and tear is only to be expected . . ."

He broke off as the car turned through wrought-iron gates with a neo-Gothic stone lodge on either side. Between two lines of ancient yew-trees a broad drive mounted to a bridge over a dry moat. Beyond the bridge a pair of vast oaken doors admitted to a cobbled courtyard; and at the end of the courtyard, by a second door narrow enough to be held by one man, a spiral stair led to a vaulted stone hall.

"Not much chance of breaking in," Gin-Fizz observed, as a footman led them up by the light of an iron lantern. "Or of breaking out, if it comes to that, once the doors are shut behind you. I'm always faintly surprised," he confessed in a whisper, "when I find myself at large again. These terrific great walls seem to say '*Now we've got you!*' And when in addition you feel that your excellent host is a man who would pop you into his *oubliette* as soon as look at you . . . Talk of the devil!"

He straightened his back as the footman threw open

the door of a shadowy room hung with tapestries and lighted from sconces. An erect figure, shrunken with age, sat framed between two branching silver candlesticks, which threw a creamy light on his brushed-up white hair and waxen face. Though a book lay open on the table before him, he did not seem to have been reading; and, as he raised a pair of sombre eyes, Arthur felt that he might have been asking why one who had read so much should read any more and why one who had waited, brooding, so long, should do more than continue to wait. If he had been in a trance, his mind could hardly have been farther away.

The footman's voice, announcing the names, roused him; and he stood up with surprising alacrity.

"I am delighted to welcome 'ee, colonel," he piped. "This young gentleman is the newcomer ye spoke of in your letter?"

"Mr. Arthur Camelford, duke," said Steeping. "He kept wicket for Oxford . . ."

"And made seventy-two for 'ee at the beginning of this week," the duke added with a bow and a smile. "Well, well, well . . . '*Extemplo Libyae magnas it Fama per urbes*'."

"'*Fama, malum qua non aliud velocius ullum*'," Arthur put in. "The bowling was tired, sir."

"Ye're too modest, I'm sure." The duke extended a hand like a bird's talon. "I am glad to see," he added with a pecking inclination of his head, "that the classics are not wholly dead in this modern, cultured, beautiful country."

For the ten minutes of formal conversation to which he stood exposed until the arrival of the motor-coach, Arthur felt that he was being not so much welcomed by a host as granted an audience by a sovereign. Colonel Steeping, of whom—in these surroundings—it was impossible to think as “Gin-Fizz”, stood to attention as he made his presentation and remained standing, his garrulous tongue between his teeth, while Majesty posited suitable questions. That day’s match had ended in a draw, then? Well, well, well! The Grasshoppers were weak in their bowling, were they?

The duke turned to Arthur and asked what he made of the so-called “modern” pronunciation of Latin, quickly indicating the answer which he wished to hear by calling it the invention of ignorant and perverse pedants.

“Whether Kaysar and Kikero would recognize themselves in their latest dress I don’t undertake to say,” the old man piped, “but they would not have been recognized in the England that I knew as a boy. The England that allowed a man to quote Thucydides in a speech. My headmaster—he had the same good Cornish name as yours, sir, by the way; that Jew rascal Disraeli made him a bishop— . . .”

“I believe he was a great-uncle,” Arthur put in.

The duke frowned slightly as though he had a mind to say that a man should know definitely and not merely “believe” about his own family. He relented in favour of a guest who could cap a quotation from the *Æneid* and passed to the question of flogging in schools, asserting that he himself knew nothing but what had been whipped into him by the one-time Bishop of Lincoln.

"Half the boys of the present day," he complained with grotesque, thwarted ferocity, "have never even seen a block or a birch-rod. Ain't that so? I don't know what education's coming to. Soft . . . Boys are growing up soft in body and soft in brain. Would these be the rest of your men, colonel? Good, good, good!"

Arthur stood back as the remaining members of the eleven filed into what he felt obliged to call "the presence." Though the old gentleman was definitely less intimidating than the picture which they had combined to paint, he was possessed of a personality that could be felt and would have made itself felt if he had been divested of his rank, shorn of his wealth and removed from his picturesque and impressive setting. The habit of command no doubt grew stronger with the unquestioning obedience which it exacted; but, to have been effective for two-thirds of a century, it must have been rooted in a perfect self-certainty that was not to be found in these ambiguous days of universal toleration. In religion and politics, in morals and manners, in æsthetic tastes and personal predilections the old duke had no doubt made up his mind inflexibly a lifetime before. He was untroubled by the restless searching of soul that drove younger people to pull their faiths and institutions up by the roots; and he towered in consequence above the hesitant and sceptical like a pope and king by right divine. It was an astonishing impression to leave at the end of ten minutes, but Arthur felt that there could never be any discussion with the old man. One might accept his views on classical education; one might hold one's peace; or one might defy the lightning. One did not politely differ, any more than one politely hinted to a reigning monarch that there was something to be said for republicanism.

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The kingly ceremonies threatened to be the severest trial of the week-end.

"And now," the old man was saying, "ye would like to be shewn your rooms."

Pulling a silken bell-rope, he despatched his guests firmly by one door as a footman entered by another with the first members of the Quidnuncs. The audience was at an end; and Majesty was preparing for the next. It was unthinkable that any one should ask for a drink or suggest a stroll in the gardens before going upstairs! The "Good, good, good!" and the "Quite right! Quite right!" were balanced by an ominous "No, no, no, no, no, no, *no!*"

Arthur followed the groom of the chambers to a wing which had been set aside for the visiting elezens and tried to overcome his sense of constraint by reminding himself that this visit was to be one of the great experiences of his life. If the castle had seemed big from the outside, it became endless as they tramped through one room after another, only to see a vista of more rooms stretching ahead of them. When Steeping whispered that here (he believed) Lady Rhayader had her quarters and that there lay the Knightons' and their children's suites, Arthur found himself looking for landmarks to establish a chain of communication from the south-west tower bedrooms to the chapel and from the chapel to the banqueting-hall.

"There are watchmen on duty day and night," said Steeping, "if you think you're going to lose your way."

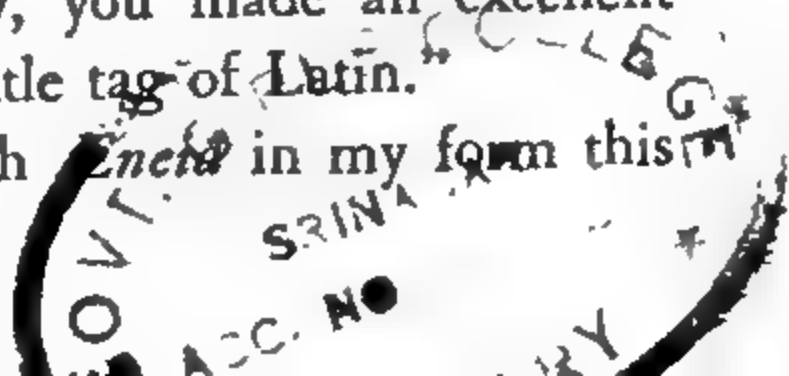
"As a precaution against fire?"

"Ostensibly, but I think it's all in the picture for the duke to have a few men-at-arms knocking about the place. Don't you agree? By the way, you made an excellent impression, Camel, with your little tag of Latin."

"We've been doing the fourth *Encha* in my form this

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term," Arthur explained. "I don't feel I can live up to his standard, though, for very long."

"Well, you won't need to make any special effort once you're placed. With a bishop and a cricket blue to your credit, you need only trouble about the things you have to avoid."

What these things were Arthur was left to discover for himself as he undressed in an oak-panelled room with a stone fire-place and ornately plastered ceiling. The lead-lights were some centuries later than the six-foot walls which the wedge-shaped windows pierced, but the crude four-poster bed and the roughly carved stools and tables were unchanged since the day when a Tudor ancestor of the duke's, with a cosmopolitan army of glaziers, carvers and plasterers from France, Italy and Flanders, had adapted this grim border-fortress to the uses of a generation bred to peace.

"They argued here about Bosworth Field," Arthur reflected, "as Gin-Fizz and I might argue about the Somme. By Jove, half-an-hour here is worth all the English history that I hand out to my little lambs in a term."

While his suit-case was unpacked, he took stock of the room, resolute to miss nothing. The embrasures were screened by leather curtains, like the doors of Italian churches. The floor—of slippery, broad elm-boards—gleamed darkly between sheepskin rugs. The sun had still to set; but the only artificial light was provided by rare candles; and, when he asked if he might have a bath, the groom of the chambers silently despatched his menials to bring cans of hot water and a shallow copper tub. It would have been little surprising if he had sent them back later to fling the dirty water through a window into the

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dry moat below; and Arthur felt sure that the bath-salts and scented soap which he found on his wash-hand-stand had not been placed there with the duke's approval or even knowledge. "Soft in body, soft in brain", he could hear the formidable little autocrat piping.

Dressing quickly, Arthur made his way downstairs to find the members of the two elevens conversing uneasily before the shut door of the chapel. They drew themselves to attention in opposing lines as the duchess came down on the arm of her daughter-in-law; and he once again had the feeling that he was in the presence of royalty. The rival captains called out the names of their men; the white-haired old lady, who was even smaller than the duke and almost as old, shook hands with each; and the little procession passed on. Then the door of the chapel was opened; and the duke led the way within.

Arthur seated himself at the back, where he could observe without being observed. A dozen years of touring with county and club sides had not prepared him for anything quite like this; and his attention wandered from the chaplain's subdued voice in search of a single word that should express and interpret Moulton Castle. Was it "feudal", "eighteenth-century", "regal"? The duchess, in her stately progress, might have been the queen of a tournament, welcoming her champions to the lists; and the shrunken duke, with his garter-ribbon and high heels, was reminiscent of Louis the Fourteenth without a wig. A shade of theatricality overlay the scene; and "unreal" flickered across Arthur's mind as he watched the score of sleek, red-faced sportsmen patting their white ties and fumbling for their places in unfamiliar prayer-books. In some way they were utterly out of the picture. It was like Commemoration Day at Brampton, when the

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Old Boys lined up in all their decorations for the young idea to admire.

And yet there was nothing unreal in all this for the duke, who was maintaining in age the tradition to which he had been brought up in boyhood. If the great neighbouring houses became godless, if a parson forsook his Geneva gown for a surplice and called himself "priest", that was their affair. The Duke of Leominster was not going to change his habit or mode of worship for any number of Oxford Movements and Catholic Revivals and Waves of Unbelief. He permitted no laxity in his household, either. Moulton Castle, first built to dominate the robbers and cut-throats of the Welsh Marches, now survived to dominate the industrial robbers of the nearby midlands and the modernist cut-throats who pressed down from the north, south, east and west on the folds of the faithful. Lonely, isolated, in the same tradition as Constantinople preserving the glories of imperial Rome in a world of barbarian invaders . . . "Byzantine" was a useful word in another way, with its suggestion of trivial state and excessive formality. . . .

"And for every one but the duke this is *mere* formality," Arthur murmured to himself. "The duchess can't hear a word that's being said. And Lady Rhayader looks as if she doesn't understand a word she hears . . ."

The chaplain gave out the number of a hymn; and an unseen organist played the first bars of *Lead, Kindly Light*. Half-turning as he stood up, Arthur saw a row of young maids in lilac dresses and caps. Behind them was a row of footmen in livery and of nondescript youths in dark suits. The castle must need an army of servants to keep it in commission; and yet they were no more successful than the blighted custodians of some ruined palace in

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giving it life. It was like Brampton in the holidays, robbed of all stir and bustle, hushed and vaguely haunted: a trifle eerie. To be sure, with nearly two dozen visitors, there should have been no room for churchyard terrors; but, as Arthur added his own deep voice to the lusty chorus about him, he had a curious feeling that they were all singing to keep their courage up. Maybe this cold weight of ageless stone, maybe the sunless rooms and shadowy passages were depressing him, but he was conscious of singing defiantly, as though to demonstrate that he at least was alive.

The hymn ended; and he saw Lady Rhayader touching the duchess's hand to make her kneel for the benediction. Old Gin-Fizz had used a phrase that afternoon about time standing still or death passing these people by. Perhaps "unnatural" was the missing word. A stone-deaf woman, a man who more than ten years earlier had exceeded his allotted span: they had outlived their usefulness, but they were unable to die. . . .

4

"The first night at school," Arthur whispered to himself, as the organ played them into the great hall and left them once more stranded, "or the first day in the army . . ."

Now, as then, he found himself looking for some one as shy and generally ignorant as himself with whom he could exchange names and so fix a dissolving personality. It was all very absurd, no doubt, when one was neither a new boy nor a lately joined subaltern, but the general air of guilty deference was infectious and the duke did nothing to make a guest feel at ease. Was it deliberate? Though

there were three generations of potential hostesses in the house, the little old man with the upstanding white hair and the watery blue eyes dispensed his hospitality with his own hands and sent a servant to shew the visitors their rooms.

Gravitating towards the member of the Quidnuncs eleven who was nearest to himself in age, Arthur ventured a comment on the coat-of-arms carved above the fire-place.

"But I expect you've stayed here before," he added in a voice that—to his horror—sounded noisy. "My name's Camelford."

"Mine's Hancock," answered the other. "No, this is my first visit. It's a marvellous place! I'm by way of being connected with a furniture business. By Jove, the things I've seen even in the few minutes I've been here! A whole lot of the stuff ought to be in South Kensington."

Arthur watched as his new friend explored the carving of the panels with a furtively professional hand. He knew little about old furniture and cared less, but, having secured a companion, he would not lightly let him go.

"Wouldn't copies be good enough for a museum?," he asked. "I always feel that furniture was made to be used and should continue to be used till it falls to pieces. The most wonderful thing about this place, to me, is that it's a going concern, not an item in Baedeker where you walk through roped-off rooms with a shilling guide. I don't mean that I should care to *live* here very long," he added.

The duke was now slowly perambulating the hall, with a few primly courteous words for each of his guests; and Arthur noticed for the first time that his coat had white facings and brass buttons. Had he carried a sword, it would hardly have been conspicuous, but—for one of his guests—it would have emphasized a steadily increasing

note of incongruity. When a generation had been raised on fox-trots and saxophones, it could not be forced back to minuets and harpsichords. And the old man was straining the legitimate privileges of a host in maintaining so much stiff ceremonial.

"Too much pomp and circumstance?," Hancock enquired. "Well, you can't have it both ways. If you want to live among museum pieces . . ."

"I don't want to become a museum piece myself," Arthur broke in. "Let's take the best that every age can give us! Building in one century, decoration in another, plumbing and lighting in a third . . ."

He stood back as Lady Rhayader and the duchess walked to the staircase. Presumably they were going to take off the mantillas which they had worn in the chapel. Presumably too, as they were dressed for dinner, they would return shortly, but Arthur felt that, if they did not come back, they would not be missed. In the presence of the little duke they seemed to lose any distinctive personality, as each of the impassive men-servants had long lost his and as the two visiting elegants were now visibly losing theirs. Like the guests and like the servants, these subdued and inarticulate women were noticed—when indeed they were noticed at all—for the pleasing harmony which they achieved with their background. It was hardly extravagant to fancy that the duke had stipulated, sixty years earlier, for a wife who would "go with" him and with the castle, wearing her tiara as bravely as he wore his star, growing white of head and misty of eye with him.

"It's all beautifully in period," Hancock whispered with the enthusiasm of a connoisseur. "The duchess has stopped still at the death of the Prince Consort. She never

goes out; and our skipper tells me she never sees a paper, so that—for all she knows—Palmerston is still prime minister.”

Arthur calculated that the old lady must have sunk into her unimaginable world of silence about the time that his own parents were being born.

“And Lady Rhayader has stopped short somewhere in the eighteen-nineties,” he suggested, as the high-cut, long-sleeved dress—tinkling with mysterious ornaments—was lost to view.

“They could be embalmed and sent to the London Museum as the most perfect specimens of their type,” Hancock declared. “*English marchioness of the late-Victorian period . . .*”

Arthur took out his cigarette-case and then hastily replaced it, as he caught Colonel Steeping’s eye.

“For a man who obviously belongs to the Regency,” he murmured, “our host is a late diner.”

“I imagine we’re waiting for Lady Knighton. Some one told me she’d gone off to meet her father,” said Hancock. “Ah, here they are! By Jove, no museum pieces in *that* quarter!”

Arthur turned at the sound of voices behind him. A tall man, with the pointed brown beard traditionally associated in England with an artist, was being hurried into the hall by an eager young woman, who explained to the duke that her father’s train had been late. Without waiting for the rebuke which the old man’s pursed lips seemed ready to administer, she flashed a glowing smile on the company and hastened to shake hands with her friends, turning at intervals to remind her father of their names.

As her back was turned to the corner in which Arthur

and his new friend were standing, it was impossible—for the moment—to see more than a pair of white shoulders and a small head of gleaming hair; it was equally impossible not to feel a change in the atmosphere as she took possession of the stage. Here at last was something young and vital. Her laugh broke up the rigidity of their attitudes; and, as her eyes swept the room with a double beam of blue light, the old duke—so impressive only a moment before—seemed to become a senile figure with an archaic manner and antiquated clothes. Probably—Arthur felt—, like most women below a certain age and above a certain grade, she was stereotyped in body and mind. Changing only with the changing modes of the day, she might have sat as model of a young woman of fashion for any Lewis Baumer drawing in *Punch* during the last ten or fifteen years. Her importance in this company was her inextinguishable youth.

“I should like to have seen the faces of the others when she arrived here first!” Hancock whispered, as the duchess and Lady Rhayader appeared at the head of the stairs.

Arthur smiled and stood aside as Lady Knighton made her round of the hall. A black dress, cut to the waist behind and caught up with a single red rose on her left shoulder, clung to her slim, erect body and emphasized every line of her slender limbs. In a London ball-room the sight of so much bare back and arms might have passed unnoticed, but in contrast to the muffled forms of the older women, she looked more than half-naked. And apparently, Arthur discovered, he was not the only person to think so. The duke, first frowning and then muttering, at last lifted up his voice to enquire with suave irony whether his granddaughter was not afraid of taking cold.

"Not unless any one opens a window," she replied with smiling and calculated impudence. "And I know I should be given plenty of notice before *that* happened! Ah, there's Colonel Steeping! How are you! What sort of a tour have you had? Charlie's terribly disappointed he couldn't play this year, but he's been so appallingly busy. He's in Birmingham, of all places, at this moment, though he hopes to get here to-night or to-morrow."

As she talked, the duchess cautiously descended the stairs. At an unseen signal, the double doors of the banqueting-hall were thrown open. The duke, once more in the centre of his own stage, created and led a stiff procession. Lady Knighton continued her conversation for a moment before preparing to follow, then caught sight of Arthur and Hancock, extended an apologetic hand, turned back to Steeping and begged him to complete the introductions.

"In the American manner, if you can," she suggested, "with a short biography and a list of suitable things for us to talk about. '*I want to have you meet Countess Knighton. She's vurry much interested in music and racial suicide . . .*'"

5

According to Rashleigh, every man of less than thirty-five fell in love with this vivacious young woman at sight; and Arthur watched carefully as Hancock and she sized each other up. He was himself too much interested in the pageant to play more than a spectator's part. The house and people, the display and ceremonial, the queer atmosphere for which he was still trying to find a word

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were different from anything that he had experienced. He would require a night and a day to examine the scenery before he studied the characters.

"Mr. Hancock must speak for himself," he heard Gin-Fizz saying. "I accept no responsibility for the Quidnuncs. Mr. Camelford is our leading authority on modern education. I seem to remember a long debate on that subject the last time I was here."

Lady Knighton smiled with a gay friendliness which made Arthur feel that for the moment he alone mattered to her. She had smiled, he made no doubt, in the same way on every one; but her graciousness atoned for the old duke's manner, which conveyed under a thin crust of formal courtesy that no one mattered to him.

"Colonel Steeping only means that I teach small boys for a living," he explained.

If—as some one in the pavilion had said—young Moulton was nearly twelve, he calculated that Lady Knighton must be in the neighbourhood of thirty; but her dazzling hair and white skin made her look ten years younger than her age. Only the presence of two tiny parallel lines between her eye-brows warned a stranger not to think of her as an effervescent girl.

"Then I shall insist on your sitting next to me," she declared, as they moved towards the door. "Colonel Steeping, I'm afraid, regards me as a dangerous heretic . . ."

"Heresy, like treason, is only dangerous when it prospers," said Arthur. "And then it's no longer heresy. I wish there were more of it about, but parents are so keen to get their sons into places which they afterwards condemn that we don't hear much constructive criticism . . ."

He stopped as Lord Gillingham approached to point out that the others were waiting to take their seats.

"You've not met my father?," Lady Knighton asked. "Yes, I expect you sometimes wish your pupils were all orphans. . . . And so this is your first visit to Moulton? I rather envy you! I know it so well . . . When you've been here a little longer, you must tell me what impression it makes on you."

As they entered the banqueting-hall, Arthur weighed the merits of "academic" as a single-word description. The party collected on a dais at the far end suggested the hall of an Oxford college, but the presence of Lady Rhayader and the duchess impaired the illusion.

"I suppose, if I were describing it," he answered, "I should have to begin with a portrait of the duke."

"It's a pity he's not been painted for so long," murmured Lord Gillingham. "You know old Lord Wemyss as the Monarch-of-the-Glen? If you could get Orpen here . . ."

"And if you could decide which was the best background," Arthur put in.

Now that he came to think of it, he did not want the old man by himself. Ten minutes earlier, to be sure, he would have said that the castle could no more be understood without a sketch of its lord than Potsdam could be understood without a sketch of the later Hohenzollerns. Now he was not sure that this would be enough. The little duke had seemed to shrink even smaller as Lady Knighton flashed into the hall; and a second figure was needed for contrast. In some way, too, the artist ought to convey a sense of discord between the sitters and their surroundings. Even a stranger could feel that the old man and his grandson's wife were the only people who

counted in this company; but, at first sight, they seemed so unlike that the biggest house might sometimes be too small for them.

"I just walked through the picture-gallery," said Arthur, "but I should like to spend hours there. You've been painted, I suppose?" he asked Lady Knighton.

"Yes. By Ambrose McEvoy."

"Was it done here, or in his studio?"

"In the studio. Why?"

"Because I always like to see people in their own setting. A studio isolates you. I expect that's quite unsound artistically . . ."

"I don't know if it is or not. But this place certainly isn't *my* setting. We're keeping them all waiting! . . . I come here for a few weeks in the summer, I admit . . ."

Arthur hurried forward to the place which the butler was pointing out to him. If Lord Gillingham was the artist he looked, it was foolhardy to hold forth in his hearing on backgrounds and contrasts, but he would have liked to be told that McEvoy had painted Lady Knighton against some part of the castle. In time she would be Duchess of Leominster, with her home at Moulton; and, though she only came here now as a visitor, she stood already for one point of view as definitely as the old duke for another: for youth against age, for experiment against tradition. . . .

The servants drew themselves to attention and the banqueting-hall became suddenly hushed as the duke rapped once on the table. More ceremonial! Arthur wondered how much of this would survive the old man's death and whether young Knighton shared his wife's obvious distaste for it. There was a note of repudiation in her voice when she told him that she only came here

for a few weeks in the summer, as though this were all she could stand. It seemed likely that in other things than education she was regarded as a "dangerous heretic". Clothes, for example . . .

Watching her out of the corner of one eye, Arthur noticed again the little parallel lines between her brows. Were they a scar received in an endless fight to assert herself? Gin-Fizz had talked of the "personal stamp" which the duke was leaving on history, of the "schooling" to which his family was subjected. Lady Knighton looked as if she would not take kindly to "schooling".

If she asked him again his "impression" of the place, Arthur felt that he had better omit his sketch of "the cast-iron duke". Neither polished manners nor an elaborate ritual could wholly disguise that the old man was at logger-heads with his grandson's wife. "*As long as I'm alive . . .*," the one seemed to be threatening. "*When I rule here . . .*," the other seemed to be promising herself.

It was really too vague for a stranger, who had only been in the house an hour, to put into words; but Arthur felt that they were fighting for possession of the castle and both making themselves rather unhappy over it.

CHAPTER TWO

SPURS OF KNIGHTHOOD

I

"*Omnipotens, sempiterne pater . . .*"

From the shadows of the musicians' gallery the high, nasal voice of the chaplain rapidly intoned a half-heard prayer and gave the note for an unseen choir to chant a Latin grace. "*His donis sobrie ac modeste utentes,*" Arthur heard. "*Una cum fidelibus omnibus . . . In nomine dilecti Filii Tui . . . Amen.*"

A second prayer followed; and he let his thoughts stray to Lady Knighton's unanswered question about the reaction of a new-comer to the atmosphere of Moulton. The obvious reply—that the entire castle was a perfect background for the duke, who paid it the compliment of dressing in character—seemed inadequate since the discovery of a moment before that there was open hostility between the old man and the young woman who, to all appearances, monopolized the character or wilfulness—however it should be called—of the two families. The gentle and melancholy Lord Gillingham on the one side could be ruled out of account as summarily, Arthur felt, as the breathless and frightened Lady Rhayader on the other. Knighton was at present an unknown quantity, the duchess a minus quantity; but, the more he thought over the phrases, intonations and glances of the last five

minutes, the more convinced he became that there were graver resentments to face than the duke's irritation at being kept waiting for dinner. The first impressions for which he had been asked must find space for the idea of conflict.

It was not difficult, Arthur fancied, to say who would get the best of the encounter. In the great banqueting-hall, with its long lines of portraits above the panelling and its massive coat blazoned on the passage-screen, the Duke of Leominster seemed to be in the very throne-room of his palace, in the very heart of his kingdom. The vast oak table at which they were standing stretched from wall to wall, with two great chairs set side by side in the middle. For the guests and for the other members of the family there were now, as for perhaps the last five hundred years, two lines of stools and chests piled with cushions.

"Per Christum dominum nostrum . . ."

At the end of each brief prayer the duke nodded as though he were giving it his approval before despatching it heavenward. To resist him, reflected Arthur, one had to resist a tradition that had its roots in the middle ages and was artfully protected against the corrosion of change. The fading light that filtered through the mullioned windows and struck a dying gleam from the sombre linen-fold panelling was broken by intermittent sconces that had first been lighted before Columbus set sail across the Atlantic. When a fire was needed, it still blazed in the middle of the stone floor, as in the time of the Lancastrians, sending its smoke to find an outlet through the louvre which could be seen glimmering in faint outline between the huge scissor-beams that supported the roof. Little indeed had been altered since the first lord of Moulton sat, in chain armour, beside a lady in a wimple. The

liveries of the servants, to be sure, belonged to the reign of George the Fourth; but, had their master thought fit to dress them in the costume of the period, there would have been nothing to shew the chance comer that he had not been spirited back to the fifteenth century.

What hope had a woman, a young woman, a half-American young woman of leaving a mark on things that even a stranger took for granted? For the second time that evening the visitors were struggling to assume appropriately devotional expressions for a ceremony that was unfamiliar and faintly embarrassing. Did they, too, feel that, when the doors of the banqueting-hall were thrown open, the little duke had led them back into the middle ages? As the last notes of the last "*Amen*" sank and died in the warm darkness of the roof, "the colonial" stood with her golden head bent and her white hands folded like a child penitent. There could be no long resistance to what was expected of any one in this house.

"Those boys sing well," Lord Gillingham murmured, as the child penitent relaxed and sat down.

Arthur found that he was among friends, with Steeping on his right and Lady Knighton—at the end of the table—on his left. Opposite him was Carruthers, the captain of the Quidnuncs, with Lord Gillingham beyond.

"The local choir?," asked Steeping.

"No, the local school," Lady Knighton answered. "I suggested it, years ago, when I discovered the duke's taste for medievalism. . . . It's so terribly important to give these country children something beyond the ordinary routine. The level of education in rural England . . ." She turned abruptly to face Arthur. "What made you become a schoolmaster, Mr. Camelford? I can understand, of course, that any one who's keen on games . . ."

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"It's the one job in England that combines the pay and work of a professional with the status of an amateur." This must be almost the twentieth time, Arthur calculated, that he had been asked the same question in the last three weeks. "It so happened," he continued, "that Brampton had a vacancy at the moment when I was looking for a place where I could exploit my one marketable asset, which is cricket."

The searching blue light in Lady Knighton's eyes seemed to be matched by the searching clarity of her voice:

"You felt no particular vocation?"

"Not even a particular enthusiasm. For that reason, you mustn't regard me as any kind of expert on education."

"But you stuck to it?"

"By the time I knew my job, I found it was a single-track business. A man with capital can start a prep-school. Otherwise he waits for a house and retires on what he can save by underfeeding his charges. Now you know the worst, Lady Knighton."

"Which is never more than half the story," she smiled encouragingly. "To keep yourself ever since you've been grown up is something. I hope you teach your boys that the first duty in life is for no one to be a burden to any one else? '*If any would not work, neither should he eat.*'"

"That sounds dangerously political! And our time's fully taken up, you know, in teaching the things that are too difficult or delicate for a boy's parents to handle. When people say: '*It's time Freddie went to school*', they only mean that Freddie has bad manners or a distressing accent which they want some one else to cure."

Lady Knighton laughed at his attempt to turn the tables

on her; and the conversation was suspended as they both discovered that they had not begun their soup.

"I take it you must *like* teaching, Camel," said Gin-Fizz. "You could get a job anywhere as a groundsman."

"Oh, it has its compensations," Arthur admitted. "There are good holidays; and I meet all sorts and conditions when I'm touring. To stay in a place like this . . ."

He broke off to gaze round the great banqueting-hall and to imagine it peopled with the dim figures from the smoke-tarnished frames above the panelling. The barren space between the passage-screen and the dais should, of course, have been filled: with men-at-arms, or retainers, or humble dependents. That was the fault with Moulton Castle: it was underpopulated. And, if two-and-twenty visitors warming with their first glasses of champagne could not bring it to life, what must it be like when it was resigned to one little old man, one deaf old woman? A rheumatism of the soul would creep gradually over any one like Lady Rhayader, who was condemned to live here. At the same time, he was enjoying himself. The food and wine were marvellous; and Lady Knighton had made it her business to put him at his ease.

"Then you wouldn't change your present work," asked Carruthers, "even if you had the chance?"

"Not to become a groundsman, certainly," Arthur laughed. "This is at least creative work. I can't think of anything in the world quite so interesting as to watch a boy's mind unfolding and his character taking shape . . ."

"You wouldn't care to look after *my* infants?," Lady Knighton enquired. "It would be a change, but you'd be doing the work nearest to your heart."

"Time Freddie went to school'!", Gin-Fizz quoted

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with a smile. "Is Moulton beginning to ask if God really made the world in six days?"

She shook her head, suddenly serious; and Arthur labelled her as one of the women to whom children were a religion.

"I've been very careful never to teach them anything that will have to be untaught later," she explained in the words and tone that he was now expecting. "I only wish I could feel that they wouldn't have to spend the rest of their lives unlearning the prejudices they'll pick up at Eton! If they go, that is. I would far, far, *far* sooner have them educated at home . . ."

She paused abruptly, with a faint flush mantling her white skin, as she discovered that a silence had fallen on the table. Before any one else could speak the duke was heard to observe with a sniff that his "little granddaughter" was "tilting at one of her windmills". So, to Arthur's thinking, a nurse-maid might have announced in oblique reproach that a child was "shewing off".

"If they go to a public-school at all," Lady Knighton continued, in her turn directing an oblique snub to the duke, "I should at least like to make it some place like Stowe, without a dead-weight of childish tradition about it. At the older schools I always feel that you go on teaching subjects that may have been suitable enough at the Renaissance . . ."

"They're what we've learnt ourselves," said Arthur. "Our only stock-in-trade . . ."

"And it doesn't matter to you that the men who control our politics and industry couldn't write two lines of Latin verse to save their lives?"

"No more could eighty *per cent.* of my pupils ten years after they've left," said Arthur. "A boy of strong

individuality can forget all I've taught him between the end of one term and the beginning of the next."

"But you surely don't allow individuality?"

"Well, we do our *best* to stamp it out. Parents don't like their sons to be 'peculiar' in any way."

"So you give them 'the public-school standard'! Stereotyped intolerance, stereotyped snobbishness . . ."

"And is there a better training for the snobbish and intolerant world in which the boy has been bred and to which he will return?" Though he offered her paradoxes as a cure for excessive seriousness, Arthur was not sorry to let her see that England got only the public-schools that she deserved. "Brampton would have to close its doors if we were suspected of giving our boys subversive ideas," he continued. "It's the parents, who pay for the public-school stamp and expect their money's worth, that are really responsible."

Lady Knighton looked down the table and lowered her voice:

"The parents don't pay you to take clean-minded, gentle children and turn them out degenerate savages! You won't admit, of course, that you do . . ."

Arthur shook his head sadly:

"I admit it all."

"Then you can understand why I'm looking for something better for *my* boys."

"Certainly! But can you find it?," Arthur asked. "You blame the schools, I blame human nature. But we mustn't use big words for small things. Most of us here to-night, I suppose, have endured a public-school education. Whether we're more brutal or degenerate than other men . . ."

The argument was interrupted by a message from the duke that he would like to have the pleasure of taking wine with Colonel Steeping and the members of the Grasshoppers' eleven.

By the time that their glasses had been raised and lowered, the conversation had resolved itself into a loose chain of mingling duologues. Arthur was amused, as the only professional pedagogue in the company, to observe that he was incomparably less ruffled by Lady Knighton's frankness of criticism than either Carruthers, who was protesting under his breath against the stones flung at "poor old Eton", and Steeping, who indignantly repeated "degenerate savages? I say, *really!* *Savages?*" until the offending term was withdrawn.

He was gratified, too, though he had not been talking for effect, to see that his impetuous antagonist was impressed, if not by the matter, at least by the manner of his argument. Not that he wanted to triumph over her! Except for her father, she seemed to be without supporters; and, though she was perhaps overready to parade her "colonial" heresies, he could not forget or forgive the duke's sneer about his "little granddaughter's windmills". The tiny parallel lines in the smooth skin of her forehead and the flush which had spread from her cheeks to her father's shewed that she had been hurt, that she was not unused to being hurt and—maybe—that the old man had intended her to be hurt.

"I expect you're wondering," he suggested with a smile, "how I can go on with a job when I think so poorly of it."

"I'm only thinking," she replied with engagingly impulsive candour, "how appallingly rude of me it was to speak like that before a schoolmaster!"

"But, if I admit the charges, won't you admit that it's very easy to make too much of them? This 'immorality' we hear so much about! Mightn't we call it 'dis-temper' . . . ?"

"You don't change it by changing its name!"

"You give it a wrong value by giving it a wrong name. The condition when sex is coming to birth and is not yet properly determined, still less properly understood: this has nothing to do with the inversions and perversions that engage the ignorant attention of the press and public nowadays . . ."

"If you didn't herd boys together . . .," Lady Knighton began.

Arthur shook his head.

"That is the doctrine of the prohibitionists," he objected.

"You can keep men sober by abolishing alcohol . . ."

"M'well! Remember I'm half-American!"

"Men can make themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake. What you *can't* do by these methods is to teach them either temperance or self-control. I defend this 'herding together' for its effects in trying a boy out. If he's too weak to keep afloat, you won't save him by engaging the best of tutors at home."

"And if he has any kind of individuality?"

"Well, if it's sufficiently robust, it will survive; and, if it's only a feeble egotism, it's better out of the way. Lord, you're making me talk like a book of my august head's sermons! But, after all, we have to live together as men, we must learn how to while we're boys. For what it may be worth," he continued at a tangent, "it would be

odd for boys in the position of your sons *not* to have been at a public-school. You may call that a fetich . . .”

Lady Knighton looked up with a smile and lowered her voice.

“No! You’re too sweetly reasonable, Mr. Camelford, for crudities of that kind. Do go on!”

“Defending our public-schools?”

“Or improving them.” She spoke with a note of pleading. “If you aimed at turning out something better than has ever been done before . . .”

“I should be satisfied to fit a boy for the actual world he has to live in.”

“But, if we had better education, mightn’t we have a better world? It’s my American blood speaking. I want to look forward instead of always adopting a worn-out tradition and an obsolete vision. If it’s human nature that’s to blame, not the schools, let’s attack human nature. Cruelty and all the rest aren’t confined to schools, they’re part of your universal distemper. If we could begin with the commandment: ‘*Thou Shalt Cause No Pain*’ . . .”

A second lull in the conversation caused her to look down the table as though she expected the duke to say: “*My little granddaughter reforming the world again?*” This time, however, the old gentleman was preparing to take wine with the Quidnuncs.

“What line does your husband take over this?” Arthur enquired. “Education and all that?”

“Oh, the conventional one! There’s an accepted way of bringing boys up. He wants Moulton to go into the Guards and Eddie into the Diplomatic. It’s unthinkable to him that war should ever come to an end or that nations should exist without ambassadors to keep the peace.” Her

voice became faintly contemptuous. "There are accepted things for everybody to do always! The boys must be taught to kill the right things at the right times and learn the code of their caste, with all the approved views on religion and morals and politics. Any dangerous enthusiasm for beautiful things must be sternly checked. It's very odd! He seems to have entirely forgotten that he had leanings to poetry as a boy. I came across some of the things he'd written before his grandfather got hold of him. . . . No, I can't look for any encouragement from Charlie, but I might carry my point by sheer obstinacy if I pitted my will against his."

"You've not yet told me what ideal you've set before yourself," Arthur reminded her. "If your American blood makes you look forward, your English blood calls you from the past. One of these boys, whether you like it or not, is going to fill a position of immense distinction and power . . ."

"For which he must be properly equipped! They must win their spurs before they kneel for the accolade! I believe in the aristocratic principle to the marrow of my bones. You have to be brought up in a republic to do that! "

"And by 'aristocracy' you mean? "

"Something more than battenning on land that was mostly stolen from the monasteries and enjoying honours that some one else won and exterminating vermin by set rules. *You're making me* talk like a Hyde Park orator! I don't care! You can't help *being* a duke, if you're born that way; but a duke is a leader."

"And how you make leaders . . .," Arthur began.

"*Not* by teaching a boy to follow, follow, follow! Other people's standards the whole time! In manners,

taste, clothes." Her face became clouded; and she sank her voice to a whisper. "I simply couldn't bear it if Moulton and Eddie were put through the same mill as their father! To be sent out hunting and shooting—which he loathed in those days—, because it would have been odd, as you would say, for any one of the hunting-shooting world to do anything else . . ."

"He's probably grateful now," Arthur felt obliged to put in.

No woman—least of all one who was half-American—could be expected to understand the scorn of the upper-class English for any one who failed or declined to conform with their standards.

"I don't suppose he cares one way or the other," Lady Knighton replied. "He lost all individuality when the machine got him. As a 'leader of men', he can make an excellent rough-and-tumble speech against people who live on the dole instead of working, he's a first-rate steward for his grandfather's property and he rids the countryside of about one fox for every ten that he'd kill if he didn't make a sport of it. I admit that's all that's expected of him, but the vice of this place is that we're harking back to a standard that no longer applies! The duke was taught to swim by being thrown into the river here. He can't imagine any other way of learning! It's waste of time to tell him that millions of men in the last war were just as hardy, just as brave without the rather drastic schooling that was fashionable in his day."

Arthur nodded sympathetically. As one course followed another, he realized that visitors to Moulton Castle were expected to be good trenchermen and that he was in danger of disgracing himself in the duke's eyes by attaining an uncomfortable repletion before the meal was half done.

SPURS OF KNIGHTHOOD

"Is it true that we're expected to demolish a bottle of port apiece after all this?," he enquired.

"You'd rise in the duke's estimation if you did. As a man-of-the-world, you understand. He was so anxious to make Charlie a man-of-the-world that I wonder he didn't completely ruin him. The moment he came of age, Charlie was provided with a flat and a mistress, to keep him out of mischief—as his grandfather called it—until he met me. It was the done thing, I suppose: you deliberately debauched your own flesh and blood. I married him chiefly because I was so sorry for him. . . . Now perhaps you understand why I'm not keen that *my* sons . . ."

She broke off, with a start, at a sudden burst of laughter from the duke's place half-way down the table.

"He seems to be in good form," Arthur observed.

"I expect he's becoming coarse," Lady Knighton answered dispassionately. "That's a very odd factor in the eighteenth-century make-up . . ." She paused to listen as a piping voice repeated the cream of the story which was still provoking merriment: "*'Spare the bishop's feelings, my dear,' I said.*"; and a flash of anger lent fire to her blue eyes. "I thought so! Would you like to hear it?" she asked Arthur. "The first time I acted as hostess here, the Bishop of Alchester was staying and I shewed him his room in the evening. It happened that I'd never been in it before and I said next day: '*Oh, you must let me come to your room again, Bishop: I've only seen it at night.*' If I'd known my charming grandfather better, I should have expressed myself differently. It's *not* very funny, is it? But he trots it out at every opportunity. It's a terrible thing, he thinks, for people to be mealy-mouthed: my American squeamishness . . .

Well, when you see what his ideas of 'manliness' have done for his own son . . ."

She stopped abruptly and looked at Arthur as though she hoped that her last words had not reached him.

"I understand Lord Rhayader is an invalid," he murmured.

"Yes. It's a great tragedy for the old people and for his wife," she answered conventionally. Then her indignation got the better of her discretion. "But the duke's wholly and solely responsible for ruining him! His idea of the way a young man should live . . . No one's supposed to know about that, though! If the duke ever discovered . . . But I expect he has," she added wearily. "Already. He knows everything. A sixth sense or else a very efficient spy-system. He'll probably send for you after dinner to know what we've been talking about. Let's get on to something harmless. If you were in my place now! What curriculum would you suggest? I daresay I'm not quite sane about those two boys, but they mean so much to me . . ."

"I should say they meant absolutely everything," said Arthur. "I really ought to see them, though, before I express an opinion," he added hastily, as though his last words contained a hint that her husband evidently did not mean very much to her.

3

Yet another interval of silence fell on the table as a page appeared at the duke's elbow with a gold dish of rose-water. When his turn came, Arthur gravely rinsed his fingers, dabbed himself behind the ears in imitation of

his neighbours and noted thankfully that his host had set a precedent for refusing dessert.

This dinner was unlike anything that he had experienced before. As one course followed another, discovery succeeded discovery; and, each time he looked down the table, he felt that he was using glasses of increasing strength. This, by the way, was in all probability how a novelist set about his work: glimpsing people first, then using a lens and turning on a stronger light. The antagonism between Lady Knighton and the duke was now explained, but the latest pair of spectacles had begun to reveal a new antagonism. This young woman was disappointed in the man whom she had married because she felt "so sorry for him".

"I told you it would be something to remember," Gin-Fizz whispered.

"It's all that," Arthur assented.

As Lady Knighton dipped her fingers into the bowl, he reviewed his verdict that she was a Lewis-Baumer "lady of fashion". To use a favourite word of hers, she had too much "individuality" to be a type; and she was too little interested in herself to trouble about fashion.

"Moulton's twelve; and Eddie's ten."

Arthur started at the sound of her voice and felt himself colouring as he was caught with his eyes fixed on her.

"I'm afraid I wasn't thinking of them at the moment," he apologized. "You were saying that the aristocratic principle was only appreciated by people who had been brought up in a republic?"

"Yes! In democratic countries you aim—in theory at least—at levelling everybody up to the same standard of excellence . . ."

"The marshal's *baton* in the private's knapsack?"

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"Not quite. Even in England you've had prime ministers who started from nothing. Equal opportunity is the means, but mass-production of excellence is the end. In aristocratic countries you aim at something . . ."

"The super-excellence of the few?"

"You might call it that. It remains to be seen whether great men *can* be produced in a democracy. The atmosphere is unfavourable. . . . In spite of the false, clogging, obsolete social barriers that masquerade as aristocracy here, you welcome your supermen . . ."

"When they've climbed the barriers. But can you breed a race of them? You set out, remember, to improve the national stock by improving education. How would you begin?"

Lady Knighton pondered for a moment, then shrugged her shoulders impatiently:

"By attacking the ridiculous idea that it's 'bad form' to be exceptional in any way! I don't want you to think for a moment that my infants are budding poets or crusaders or anything but intelligent, friendly little boys. I mean them to be something more, though, than the public-school standard encourages. If it's 'exceptional' to be absolutely straight, absolutely fearless . . ."

"It's what we've been aiming at ever since Chaucer! The very parfait gentle knight . . ."

"Then the schools—or human nature, as you'd say—have made a pretty complete failure! If you think how the highest in the land dodge in and out of the divorce-court and the bankruptcy-court and the police-court . . . I want my boys to realize that '*noblesse oblige*' has a meaning. What they *do* I don't mind, it's what they *are*. They can collect stamps or grow orchids . . ."

"So long as they don't let down their order . . . ?"

"Or—what's much worse—take advantage of it. That's the duke's line, you see: a Moulton can do no wrong and the mob deserves horsewhipping if it thinks otherwise. I know that's *one* conception of aristocracy . . ."

"Which wouldn't survive an hour at one of our much-attacked schools," Arthur put in. "Within the limits of the class we cater for, we're merciless equalitarians. . . . Were you educated here or in America?"

The question seemed to take her by surprise; and she frowned slightly, as though her preoccupation with the future of her two sons had expunged the memory of her own childhood.

"I really don't know that I had any regular education," she answered at last, "after my mother died. I travelled with my father. Learning languages, you know, and seeing pictures and listening to music. I often think that's what I should like to do with Moulton and Eddie!," she exclaimed eagerly. "There's really no magic about being taught in one place at one time if you can afford something better . . ."

In another moment she would have bolted back to her eternal passion, but Arthur pressed her to give him her recollections of America.

"I'm interested, you see," he explained. "You're such a revolutionary, if I may say so, in these surroundings . . ."

"No more than you or any one else would be if you'd seen anything of the world outside this one place. I don't know what there is to say . . ."

With patience and persistence Arthur discovered the bare facts of a brother who had been killed in Gallipoli and another who had lost a foot in France, of a home in

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Virginia where Lady Knighton had spent half her childhood and of two married sisters whom she described with her usual detachment as "the beauties of the family". As her blue eyes darkened and her cheeks became faintly flushed, Arthur felt it hard to believe that any one could be more beautiful in the virginal, Scandinavian style, but she was wholly unaffected in setting small store by her looks. Indeed, the sole reminder that she was a young woman talking to a young man came when she whispered suddenly:

"We'll continue this some other time! I *must* say a word to my other neighbour, or there'll be fresh trouble with the duke. He imagines that, if two people shew the faintest interest in what they're discussing, they must be making love to each other. I feel that the world must have been even more of a jungle than it is now, when he was a young man!"

"I should have thought the setting was rather public . . .," Arthur began.

"Perhaps they didn't mind in those days. . . . That, by the way, is a thing we must include in the training of our very perfect, gentle knight: some rational attitude towards sex. The monogamy-tempered-by-hypocrisy of the Victorians has broken down. Post-war promiscuity has defeated its own end by making sex a bore. I must have *some* ideal to set before these two young men."

"If they behave as they'd like to see their own sons and daughters behaving," Arthur suggested, "and as their own parents behave . . ."

"That's rather dangerous," Lady Knighton broke in. "Parents nowadays . . . However . . ."

The end of dinner, Arthur considered, was of a piece with the beginning. When the dessert had been handed, the duke stood up to toast the king. Then he proposed the health of "the ladies", to which the duchess—watching him with the patient, half-dazed smile of the deaf—responded with a bow. After that, accepting their dismissal, the three ladies retired in single file down the hall and two footmen threw open a pair of doors at the back of the duke's chair.

In the room beyond, Arthur observed formidable preparations for what the old man no doubt considered the serious part of the feast. Despite the mildness of the September night, two fires were burning on open stone hearths; and in front of each stood a semicircular table with plates and glasses. The centres of the tables had been hollowed out, leaving only a narrow rim of shining wood from which was suspended a net filled with biscuits. Such pieces of furniture Arthur had occasionally seen in old shops, but he had not expected to find them still in use. Their size, he felt, was in keeping with the gigantic scale on which everything was conducted at Moulton Castle.

"Seat yourselves, gentlemen, seat yourselves!", the duke called out, impelling Lord Gillingham to one table and returning to preside over the other. "As we have two strangers, I claim the privilege of putting them next to me. Hancock! Camelford! I regret that my grandson is not present to look after 'ee at the table yonder, but I hope he will be here to make amends to-morrow." A moment of silence followed as the decanters circulated.

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The duke waited till every glass was filled, then tapped on the table and stood up with a smile that invited them to assist in the culminating mystery of an immemorial rite which he had been appointed to guard. "And now, gentlemen: Fox-Hunting! And, if you please, *no* heel-taps!"

Though he had only hunted a fox from the saddle of a bicycle, Arthur drank the toast and sat down, wondering how soon he might—without disgracing himself—remind his host that they were an eleven in some sort of training. Those who survived in the older tradition were most fearless eaters and drinkers! And apparently one died young or not at all. In the last twenty minutes the duke seemed to have dropped twenty years. The piping voice of old age was becoming noticeably stronger; and the cackling laugh had deepened to mellow jollity. Recognizable for the first time, this was the man round whom all the legends clustered: the master who hacked all night after a late kill, breakfasting off burgundy and cold beef, to a distant meet; the boroughmonger who scattered radical gatherings with his own whip; the roysterer with his following of pugilists and courtesans; the gamester with his cock-pit and ring. People might speak of him as a man whom death had passed by; but, to Arthur's thinking, he had been more conspicuously overlooked by the living spirit of the age, by what other people called "civilization" and—most of all—by law and public opinion. In all England there could be no one so splendidly immune to official interference. It must be as much as a man's life was worth to tell the Duke of Leominster that he had omitted to take out a game licence!

And here was Arthur sitting by his side, sipping his port, stretching a leg to his fire. . . .

This was an amazing end, he reflected, to the day that had begun on the parched cricket-ground of Fernley; and it was hard, Arthur found, to realize that his staid neighbours were the men with whom he had played and wrangled and laughed for the last three weeks. At the moment they were much more like his older colleagues at Brampton when Dr. Irving collected them all for one of his formidable staff-dinners: their conviviality was self-conscious; and, as though their white ties were a mark of fancy dress, they were all—with greater or lesser success—playing a part on some one else's stage. A mark of fancy dress, or a symbol of surrender. Good manners had ordained that they should attend the little service in chapel, if this were the old man's wish; but it was impossible to imagine that any one would cross him even if good manners were not involved.

"If he insists on my drinking too much . . .," Arthur reflected unhappily, as their glasses were replenished after the final toast.

It would certainly, as Gin-Fizz had promised, be a thing to tell one's grandchildren. Moulton Castle in the last years of the great duke . . . Stevenson must have had some such twittering, Tithonus figure in mind when he created his polished, ruthless "Sire de Malétroit". What was the old ruffian's threat? "*It will be no great satisfaction to me to have your interesting relics kicking their heels in the breeze below my windows; but half a loaf is better than no bread, and if I cannot cure the dishonour, I shall at least stop the scandal.*" Nobody could ever be startled to hear the duke talking in that strain; and, if any one whispered that the old man had an elder brother imprisoned somewhere in an iron mask . . .

"Ye were sitting next to my little granddaughter, I

think, at dinner," murmured the polite voice of a host making conversation.

Arthur started and came out of his disordered fancies.

"We had a very interesting talk about education, sir. Do I understand that your grandson arrives to-morrow?"

The duke nodded:

"He spends most of his time between London and Birmingham. I have property in both places. He will count it a privilege to meet 'ee, I'm sure. As a lad, he was a most surprising book-worm. It's a rare thing, ain't it, to flog a boy *away* from his studies?"

"I certainly don't find it necessary."

"I can tell 'ee *I* did!" A faint frown settled for a moment on the old man's lined face. "Moyra always pretends that I kept him from becoming a poet. If I *did*, it was the best day's work I ever did for him. Philosopher-kings may have their place in Utopia, but I prefer to keep poetry out of public and private business. . . . So ye were discussing education? Well, well, *well!* Poor Moyra's a presentable young woman, but the pretty girls of this generation spoil themselves by trying to seem intelligent. It don't *suit* 'em, Camelford! A woman's first business is to charm the senses. If she can't do that, intelligence won't help her; if she can, she don't need it."

The little man crumbled a biscuit and stretched his high-heeled shoes to the fire as though the last word on women had now been spoken. Arthur wondered whether Lady Knighton had failed to charm the husband whom she had married from pity and whether this was the root of the duke's undisguised antagonism to her; he also wondered what had happened to the "morganatic wives", as old Gin-Fizz called them, and the families of "Fitz-

Moulton " which the old man had planted about the country.

" If I had to choose between a plain, clever wife and a stupid, beautiful one . . . , " he began.

" Thank God, ye don't. Ye choose a wife to breed from. If ye don't like her looks, ye have all the frail beauties of the world to pick among."

" But, unless they spoil themselves by trying to seem intelligent, you're no better off."

" Ye mustn't seek intelligence among *women* at *all*, my dear sir! If ye do, ye'll get more than ye bargained for. Would ye call Moyra intelligent, now? "

Arthur hesitated before answering. Lady Knighton had warned him that the duke would want to know what they had been discussing; and he did not wish to make her lot harder by siding too distinctly with or against her. Twice in two minutes she had been deliberately summoned, like a filly in a sale-ring.

" She can tie me in knots, sir," he replied, " but most people can do that."

" Well, I hope ye didn't tell her so. She has a monstrous good opinion of herself, as it is," the old man grumbled. " Whether it's plumbing or politics . . . In my young days one said what was to be done and women yielded to one's better judgement. There's an old saying that, when two people are riding the same horse, one must ride in front. . . . The bottle stands, Camelford."

Arthur filled his glass slowly, wondering the while if it was by accident or through the lure of alliteration that the duke had chosen two such poles to mark the range of his granddaughter's superior wisdom. On politics he had still to hear Lady Knighton express an opinion, but he could imagine without help her views on the lighting and sanita-

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tion of the castle. To any one who had spent a day and night in an American hotel the absence of bathrooms here would be disconcerting; to a young woman who was the most exquisitely fragrant creature that Arthur had met in his brief experience of the luxurious world it must be an ever-green annoyance. And no doubt Lady Knighton protested regularly; no doubt the duke retorted as regularly that the arrangements, for thrice her lifetime, had been good enough for every one else; no doubt the altercation developed into an offensive question whether the fairest skin entitled a woman to appear half-naked, with an offensive rejoinder that skins should be kept clean whether they were exposed or not. The tiny exchanges before and during dinner supplied a fair indication of the way in which the Duke of Leominster and his grandson's wife debated their differences: it was, in all essentials, the dialectic method of the lower third at Brampton, where to convince seemed less important than to wound.

Meanwhile the old man was waiting for a comment on the position which he had assigned to woman as man's immutable handmaid.

"D'you feel, sir, that one can safely generalize about the sexes?" Arthur enquired with a daring that surprised him. Perhaps the wine was giving him a false assurance, but it really did seem about time that somebody stood up to the old man. "I regard them as so utterly different . . ."

"One must ride in front," the duke repeated.

"Then I should put the woman there. At every stage she has less to gain and more to lose than a man . . ."

"I don't follow that," the duke interrupted with warning asperity.

Arthur was not to be daunted. What if the old gentleman *did* say to Gin-Fizz: "*Ye needn't bring that young*

jackanapes here again”? His offence would be: he had refused to be bullied! And a games-master, anyway, had no place in ducal society.

“If a man becomes prime minister—which is the biggest thing any one can do in this country—, she’s only the prime minister’s wife,” he suggested. “So she gains less . . .”

“And she’d have been nothing at all if he hadn’t married her,” the duke interrupted.

“Whereas,” Arthur continued, “if he becomes a convict, she’s left to look after the children. If a child dies, it’s the child her husband has begotten, but it’s the child she’s borne. I don’t call myself a feminist, but I feel that women haven’t yet had a fair show . . .”

The duke sipped his wine thoughtfully, murmuring that it was easy to see his young friend was not married.

“And, when that happy day comes,” he snapped, “I shall be interested to see whether your wife takes your name or ye take hers. No, no, no, no, no, Camelford! When a woman marries, she becomes part of her husband’s family. No question—for either of them!—of standing aside to ask whether they gain less or lose more by any transaction. Once ye begin that sort of thing, it’s the end of the family.” The old man pushed his chair back to draw his other neighbour into the conversation. “I can’t argue with ’ee whether men should rule women or women should rule men or children should rule both, which is what we seem to be getting to nowadays. That’s all beside the point. It’s a question, ain’t it?, whether men *or* women are free to do what they like with their own lives. In general, I think ye’ll find they’re not. Once ye concede *that* amount of order in chaos, the rest follows. Man, who embodies and upholds and defends the

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family . . . Leave feminism, as ye call it, to countries without a history . . . The bottle stands! ”

5

Arthur set the decanter circulating and waited for his fellow newcomer to exercise in his turn the privilege of maintaining conversation with their formidable host. By luck or cunning the unfortunate Lady Knighton's sins of pride and presumption had been pushed out of sight; but the old man was muttering something that sounded like : “ Feminism fiddlesticks . . . Petticoat government . . . No, no, no, no, *no* . . . ”

“ Would you say, sir,” Hancock enquired with a deference which Arthur felt had been woefully lacking in his own manner, “ that there was more or less liberty in England than when you were a boy? ” Though the question was stilted enough, Rashleigh and Carruthers looked up with guarded interest, as though they had urged the speaker to “ draw ” the old man for reminiscences of his legendary past. “ We're hemmed in by so many new laws and regulations nowadays . . . ”

“ Trying,” the duke interposed scornfully, “ to make people respect an act of parliament when they've ceased to respect the position to which they were born! ”

Evidently, Arthur decided, they were to have no stories of the brave days when a man could do as he liked with his own. The duke was now muttering about jacks-in-office and what he would do to all government departments if he had his way.

“ I suppose there's more freedom of thought . . . ,” Hancock tempted him again.

"There's certainly more absence of thinking!," the duke rejoined. "If people thought at all, they'd see that the only 'freedom' to-day is to be found on a desert island, where they'll be free to starve. Once ye're part of any community . . . High or low . . . The higher ye are, the less 'freedom' ye have! Is the Prince of Wales free to renounce the throne of England? I say 'No!' He belongs to his people." Having disposed of Hancock, the old man turned on Arthur. "When people like my little granddaughter talk about 'following your own bent' . . ."

A shrug rounded the sentence as though men of more than eighty lacked time and strength to teach people what they should have known by instinct.

"I submit it's a good thing, sir," Carruthers ventured, "that a few exceptional men are always ready to kick over the traces. If the youthful Keats had stuck conscientiously to his pills and powders . . ."

"Would ye call it an equally good thing," the duke enquired, "if *I* had given my life to scribbling? Until these rascals at Westminster tear up the constitution, I'm no more 'free' to evade my just and proper responsibilities than I'm free to change the colour of the eyes I was born with." He turned again to Arthur. "I wonder if ye were any more successful than I've been in shewing my little granddaughter that! Ye say ye were discussing education. Whatever else it does, education must first fit a man for the position he has to fill afterwards. Ye would hardly send the heir-apparent to an art school! Could ye get *that* into Moyra's intelligent head?"

"Oh, we agreed over what boys should be taught," Arthur replied. "It was a question whether the public schools of the present day . . ."

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The duke nodded with sombre scorn :

“ Of which she knows less than the stopper of that decanter! I told ’ee my only complaint against modern education, Camelford: it makes boys too soft. Some years ago I set up a sort of school here to teach the management of big estates. After a year my grandson was the only pupil left. The others didn’t seem to care. No seriousness had been flogged into them. They shrugged their shoulders for all the world as though agriculture in this country were doomed. Well, if that’s their feeling, they *deserve* to disappear. If they have no more faith than to sell their land to the first comer . . . The bottle stands, Hancock, the bottle stands! Help yourself and then give me a glass, if you will be so kind.”

When the decanter reached Arthur, he sent it on without replenishing his own glass. Though the omission was observed, it evoked no comment from his host, who was arguing for scientific stock-farming with a knowledge and passion that sounded strange in a house where electric light and central heating were still unknown. To the land—until the “ rascals at Westminster ” took it away—he and his children and grandchildren were dedicated. They owed it the best of themselves. They must be trained and equipped for its service. In his own way, the old man believed as fiercely and proudly as his grandson’s wife that those who inherited their blood were not to be as other men. Their spurs of knighthood had to be earned.

“ These young gentlemen,” the duke was saying, with a cast back to the failure of his agricultural college, “ seemed to think they could learn all they needed at the end of a day’s hunting. Knighton will tell ’ee, when

he comes, that it's the study of *years*. I began to initiate my eldest son as soon as he had come down from Oxford and gone round the world. . . . Ye were discussing him with Moyra to-night, Camelford, I think? "

So abrupt was the attack that Arthur nearly overturned his wine. It was inconceivable that even the keenest ears could have caught a few murmured words, twenty feet away, against the din of a dozen conversations.

"I was sorry to hear that Lord Rhayader was an invalid," he mumbled.

"Yes." The monosyllable suggested that any one who ever again obtruded his impertinent compassion in that house would do so at peril of his life; and the menace was underlined by the old man's immediate return to his normal suavity. "Well, then I started on my grandson," he continued, turning to Hancock. "If the tradition of the big estates is to survive and we're to go on rendering the service that has always been expected of us . . . I'm aware that all this is quite out of date in countries where three generations make an old family; but, if I live long enough to have any part in the education of Knighton's sons . . . I am not growing any younger. Moyra no doubt had something to say about our being slaves to our own possessions?," he asked, turning on Arthur as Arthur himself would turn on a boy whom he suspected of pulling faces behind his back.

"We didn't get as far as that. It was really a discussion of schools against private tutors."

The duke sat silent for many moments, twisting the stem of his wine-glass.

"And may I ask what line ye took?," he then enquired.

"Well, I didn't want to run down my own job unduly. On the other hand, when you're paid the compliment

of being asked if you'll take on the job of tutor yourself . . ."

"Did Moyra ask 'ee to come and look after her boys? "

"I can't think it was seriously intended . . ."

Now that it was too late to retire, Arthur recognized that he had made a false step. In the unending war between Lady Knighton and the duke, the next movement would probably be a charge that she was intriguing to upset the plans of her husband and his grandfather.

"It's an idea she's had in mind for a long time," said the old man.

"But I can't flatter myself that she'd choose me on an hour's acquaintance," Arthur laughed. "In any event, I'm committed to my present job as long as Brampton wants me."

The answer seemed definite enough to dismiss the subject and perhaps to shield Lady Knighton from blame. The duke, however, who seemed to have a disconcerting strain of perversity in him, continued to twist his wine-glass about, shaking his head gently as though he considered an excellent proposal had been rejected in altogether too great haste.

"I presume the school could find some one to take your place," the old man suggested at last. "I'm on the governing body, ye know. If I spoke a word to Dr. Irving . . ."

"But I understood you wanted the boys to go to Eton, sir," Arthur exclaimed in surprise.

"If they were my children, I should insist," the duke answered. "But, if Knighton allows himself to be talked over, I must give in. I could trust 'ee to keep my grand¹laughter's more extravagant notions in some

kind of check. Wild-flowers, ye know, and some tomfoolery called 'eurhythmics' . . ."

"But I'm afraid it's absolutely out of the question, sir!," Arthur broke in. "Term begins in less than a week."

The old man swallowed the last drops of his wine as though he had not heard the interruption.

"Ye should have a look at the boys before ye decide," he recommended. "They're good-looking little fellows, though Moyra keeps their hair too long. . . . The bottle seems to be standing. Is no one having any more? Then we might join the ladies. Ye should certainly have a look at them, Camelford," he repeated. "I should like your expert opinion, as a trainer of colts. If I take 'ee along now, ye can put 'em through their paces . . ."

"But won't they be asleep?," Arthur asked.

"And if they are?," the duke demanded callously. "I was a deal younger when my father had me out of bed to see a Chartist whipped. There's altogether too much *coddling* of young people nowadays! "

CHAPTER THREE

THE PRINCES IN THE TOWER

I

As Arthur followed his host through a labyrinth of echoing stone passages and spiral stairs, a clock—rather out of place in a house where one might have expected that the time and state of the night would be cried by a watchman with lantern and staff—very deliberately struck eleven.

The rest of the party, led by Lord Gillingham, had been sent to change into smoking-jackets and, later, to find their way into the long gallery, where—their host informed them—their “pipes and bowls” would be in waiting. As the ladies had presumably been dismissed for the night, it seemed to Arthur unlikely that any one could reach the boys’ room without rousing their mother. He could only hope that she would not hold him responsible for this most unseasonable visitation and that, if there were an altercation with the duke, he would not be compelled to take sides.

“Why she consents to stop here I don’t know,” he muttered. “She and this old gentleman are always pulling different ways . . .”

Their destination, he surmised, was one of the four corner towers; and, as they passed from panelled to tapestried walls through one strapped and studded oak door after another, he felt that his question was being

answered for him. What a holiday-home the castle must be for a couple of young boys! The duke at this moment seemed almost to be leading him backwards against the stream of history, from the age of science and order to the last dark days before Henry Tudor burst from Wales and pressed the disintegrating feudal system into his own service. They were back in the England of Stevenson's *Black Arrow*; and they could live the book instead of merely reading it.

"If I'd been given the Tower of London as a play-room!," Arthur sighed in passing envy.

And yet the shabby Gloucestershire rectory, despite a masterful father and five fairly quarrelsome children, had been a happier place than this gigantic fortress which was still not big enough to let one small family live here in peace. The reason, maybe, was that Canon Camelford, in spite of his cloth, never proselytized and at Moulton no one did anything else. Ever since they sat down to dinner Arthur felt that Lady Knighton and the duke had been trying to make a convert of him; their talk was all of moulding and training; their quarrels were all over the destiny which they wished to impose on others. At the rectory the only remembered rules of conduct had been: "Tell the truth and keep away from the chaff-cutter."

"No one ever tried to make *me* a leader of men," he reflected. "Thank God! So long as I didn't come a cropper . . . And thank God I'm not expected to make supermen out of my young hopefuls at Brampton. If these unhappy children could be *forgotten* for a year or two . . ."

And yet, he had to admit, it must be hard for Lady Knighton to leave them alone when she knew that the

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duke, who had apparently come to grief with his own son, would not lose an opportunity of trying to shape them. It must be no less hard for the duke to sit silent when an opinionated young woman told him that his ideas were out of date and rushed to the defence of her sons whenever he suggested that they should be brought up like other boys of their class. As the old man approached the top of the final staircase, Arthur saw Lady Knighton hurrying from her room at the unexpected sound of footsteps; and, if they had been the assassins who murdered the princes in the Tower, she could not have put a fiercer protectiveness into her attitude.

"What on *earth* are you doing here at *this* time of night?," she demanded in a tone that he would not have dreamt of using to any one in his own house.

"I've brought Mr. Camelford to see your ewe-lambs, my dear," the duke answered sunnily, "I understand ye've suggested he might become their shepherd . . ."

"But they're asleep! And I can't have them waked just to be shewn off . . . Any time you like to-morrow, Mr. Camelford," she continued with a smile that acquitted Arthur of complicity in the raid.

"It wouldn't do 'em any harm if we went in for five minutes," the duke persisted, with a stealthy shuffle forward.

Lady Knighton shook her head and slipped in front of him.

"*Quite* out of the question," she replied firmly.

The silence that followed was only broken by a sound of quick breathing which made Arthur feel that two stubborn wills were wrestling for physical mastery. In the end it was the old man who gave way; and, when he turned on his heel in sour defeat, Lady Knighton

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stumbled and recovered herself as though he had flung her from him. Both were white, both trembling; and neither seemed to remember that there was an audience for the scene until Arthur turned, with a smile that was intended to express sympathy, and prepared to descend the stairs again. Then she touched his arm and pointed to the open door of her boudoir.

"Better give him a little time to cool down," she whispered. "I expect you're dying to smoke, aren't you? If it doesn't bore you to talk to me . . . Say how you like my flamingo-red silk hangings. A pleasant splash of colour, don't you think, in this wilderness of grey-stone?"

Obviously she was snatching at any excuse to keep him from referring to a scene which had left them both throbbing and humiliated, but Arthur could only explore for an opening to tell her that she looked tired to death and ought to go at once to bed.

"Shan't I be keeping you up?," he asked. "I *should* like to stay long enough to apologize for my share in the trouble. An innocent but unfortunate reference to something you'd said at dinner, clearly not meaning it to be taken seriously . . ." He stopped in front of the piano and took up a silver-framed photograph of two fair-headed boys with eyes that seemed to follow him about and look through him. "They're extraordinarily like you," he murmured.

"Are they? Well, they'll have time to outgrow that," Lady Knighton smiled.

"I hope they won't. If they keep your colouring . . . I'm afraid I'm being frightfully personal, but you must have seen at dinner that you have the unfortunate effect of making me speak first and think afterwards!"

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The blue eyes shone mischievously, then grew sombre :

" I have all the opportunities for cross-questions and crooked answers with my relations! I welcome a little directness from my friends. . . . Those are my two brothers you're looking at now."

" I should have known that from their likeness to your boys. They were Gunners? "

" Yes. . . . I wish I could think it had done anybody any good for one of them to be maimed and the other killed. Perhaps that is what makes me a thorn in the duke's side. I want to change everything, everything, *everything* that made that war possible; and he wants to keep everything that has made England what she is, good and bad alike. However, that's rather a big subject! This is Charlie." She pointed to the photograph of a dark and fleshy Guardsman and continued, without waiting for a comment: " So you told the duke about my proposal? It was made in all seriousness, by the way! I suppose he wanted you to see what you'd be letting yourself in for."

" No, I said it wasn't practical politics, but he insisted I must see the boys before refusing finally."

" You mean he *wanted* you to come? Oh, this is the most interesting thing I've heard for a long time! Do sit down and tell me all about it. Why in the world . . . Nothing happens without a purpose in this house."

2

Arthur accepted a chair and lighted a cigarette, while Lady Knighton made herself a bed of cushions on a divan at right-angles and sat down with her feet tucked under

her. Against the glowing silk brocade that covered the walls, her arms and shoulders gleamed milk-white; and the light of a standard lamp beside her struck sparks of gold from her waving hair. She looked too young, now that she was apparently at peace, to have sons of twelve and ten; and yet, when she stood up to the duke, she behaved as his equal in force and authority and even in age.

"Well, you were justified to the letter," Arthur began. "Your grandfather put me next to him and started right away to find out what we'd been talking about . . ."

He paused as Lady Knighton crossed the room softly and fumbled with the latch of the door. From where he was sitting, he could not see that it was open; and, if it had not been fantastic to imagine that any one would descend to listening at key-holes, he would have been tempted to think she was making sure that no member of the alleged "spy system" was outside.

"And he too has seriously invited you to come as tutor?," she asked with a touch of grimness. "It's as well that you'd turned me down already! The worst thing that can happen to any plan of mine is for the duke to give it his blessing."

"I had imagined that he was dead set on Eton. It was rather a surprise . . ."

"He's dead set on getting the boys away from me. A school would break down some of my evil influence. The right kind of tutor would break down even more. It's Charlie who wants Eton. Wouldn't you be happier if you smoked a pipe? I associate you somehow with pipes and bathing in a river all the year round and a healthy scorn for hot-water bottles."

“ Every inch a one-hundred-per-cent he-man? I sincerely hope I’m not! ”

Arthur felt for his pouch, glancing the while at a softly-ticking grandfather’s clock. He had no idea how soon the duke would recover his temper and depended on his companion to tell him the next movement in the complicated ritual of the castle. A week-end, he felt, would be about as much as he could bear, though this was likely to be the most memorable week-end of his life and this fire-lit scene the most memorable part of it. Lady Knighton was sitting with bent head, pouring the pearls of her long necklace from one hand to the other. One shoulder-strap had slipped, one red-heeled shoe was hanging over the edge of the divan; and her slender body had adjusted itself comfortably to the cushions at her back and side. He felt that he could sit for ever like this, indolently and intimately, watching her faint movements and listening for her rare laugh. For the second time he wondered what her sisters were like, that she described them as “ the beauties of the family ”.

“ The duke didn’t go farther than to say that, if you and Lord Knighton both held out, he’d have to give in. On the whole, you know, I’m slightly against you on this; but, if you’re wedded to the tutor idea, I may be able to help you in finding a suitable man . . . ”

“ I must first of all discover how this all fits in . . . Mr. Camelford, the old man would sell his soul—if he hasn’t already parted with it in the usual quarter!—to get us under the patriarchal roof and eye. He succeeded in bringing my parents-in-law back here when they married. He tried to do the same with Charlie and me, but I dug my toes in. . . . The holidays here are quite enough. What this *new* move means . . . ”

"I felt he was making the best of a bad job," said Arthur.

Lady Knighton shook her head slowly.

"You mustn't be misled by any talk of 'giving in' on *his* side! The lust for power is really a disease with him; and it gets worse as he feels his time shortening. Have you *ever* stayed in a house where everything's been more stage-managed? The longer I keep my boys out of his hands, the more desperately he'll bribe and intrigue and intimidate to get hold of them. The furniture and these hangings are one of the bribes!"

It would have been out of place, Arthur felt, to ask for examples of the duke's ingenuity in less amiable directions; but without recourse to violence it was difficult to see how he could carry his point.

"I imagine that if you declined point-blank . . ."

"But how can I, if he says he needs Charlie to look after things here?"

"You could insist on a house of your own in the neighbourhood."

"No, he'd get Charlie, who's absolutely dependent on him, and wait for me to follow. I have my own money, but I can't, for the boys' sake, have a public wrangle. Oh, dear, I *did* hope this wasn't coming up again for a few years. I've endured our horrible house at Stourgrove on the understanding that, when Charlie's finished in Birmingham, we shall go to London. If the duke's trying to upset that and sugaring the pill by pretending to give way over the boys . . . I'd rather they went to the worst school in England than spent all their time here, under his influence. It would have been different if I could have persuaded *you* to come . . ."

Thrown carelessly into the form of a statement, the

words had all the effect of an entreaty; and, to leave her meaning in no doubt, she looked up, idly tossing a small scented handkerchief into the air, for his answer.

"I'm afraid I can't possibly leave my headmaster in the lurch, Lady Knighton," Arthur replied. "And really, you know, nothing I could do . . ."

"Wouldn't be as well done by anybody else? You must let me have my own opinion about that. Shall I be as 'personal' as you've been to me? If I had you at my back, I could snap my fingers at the duke. You seemed to me at dinner so entirely without sham, so entirely without fear. That was more important than what you said about teaching for the love of teaching."

As his pipe was now empty, Arthur was constrained to fill it again in the hope of hiding his embarrassment. From eight till thirty-three—at a preparatory school and a public school, at Oxford, in the army and again at a public school—he had been taught that the deadliest sin but one that a man could commit was to analyse himself and that the deadliest of all was to discuss the results of such an analysis with any one. On a boy or man of this stamp, whether he was called introvert or ego-maniac, the English public-school system had no mercy. The common-room at Brampton, which was no less malicious than the lower third, would enjoy itself prodigiously if it ever guessed that he had sat up till midnight discussing with a woman whether he was or was not "without sham, without fear".

"It would make things easier for me," he told Lady Knighton, "if I knew what you thought the duke was after."

"For me too!," she sighed. "I can only say generally that he wants to get hold of my boys so that he can bring

them up in his own way. Sixty or eighty years ago that was the accepted way, but I choose to think that we're somewhat less brutal and may become less brutal still in time."

"I see. And you think that by bringing your boys up in *your* way . . ."

"If I can help it, they *shan't* have all the bloom rubbed off them in childhood!," she broke in. "For their own happiness and their neighbours', they shall recognize that they're living in the twentieth century and not the eighteenth. If they settled here, the old man would begin by spoiling them. Then he'd set them against me—women just don't count in this place!—and sneer at them for being babies if they shewed that he'd shocked them. Even if he tried to behave decently, I don't think the castle is a wholesome place for young people."

"You mean literally?"

Lady Knighton hesitated and then stood up to take a ponderous volume of *Sporting and Other Memories* from a case by the door.

"Cast you eye over that," she suggested, "and tell me what you think of it. There's a whole lot about the duke in his young days. *My view* . . ."—She paused to listen, then lowered her voice—"My view is that there's a strong strain of insanity in him. His matches and wagers and brawls and escapades and practical jokes were a little extravagant, even for a young man even all that time ago, but they went on when he was no longer a young man. He's certainly not sane on politics . . ."

"We managed to keep off that," said Arthur.

"I don't think he's sane in his passion to control people. His rages, too, if any one crosses him . . . If that horrible

scene to-night had taken place ten years ago, he'd have struck me. Now that he's too old, he'll try to achieve the same result by other means. I can't think it's healthy for children to be brought up in a *Grand Guignol* atmosphere. Terror. Madness."

"But I don't see there's anything he can *do* . . ."

"Oh, he wouldn't *injure* my boys, for fear of imperilling the succession; but I honestly and soberly believe there's nothing too fantastic, too right-down wicked for him to attempt if you resisted him seriously. However, there's no reason why our family troubles should be thrown at the head of an inoffensive visitor! I should think it would be quite safe for you to go down now," she broke off, as the clock chimed a quarter.

Arthur stood up and knocked out his pipe.

"And I should think it would be quite safe for you to go to bed now," he returned. "The princes in the tower are not going to be smothered to-night. And you're looking tired out. I'm afraid I haven't been much use, but if I *can* help . . ."

Lady Knighton smiled and held out her hand:

"If he tries again to get us here, I shall reopen the attack. You'll have had time to turn round by then. If I come to you with tears in my eyes . . ."

"I sincerely hope you won't do that," Arthur laughed uncomfortably. "I should promise anything . . ."

"And I don't know that you'd regret it, if I'm right in thinking that you like teaching and dislike the pettiness of teaching in a school. I believe you'd hit things off to perfection with Moulton and Eddie. And I'm sure you'd find me the easiest person in the world to get on with . . ."

"I wonder whether I *should*," Arthur muttered.

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For the first time that night, her expression suggested that frankness could be pushed too far.

"I wasn't asking for compliments," she replied with a touch of stiffness. "If I *had* been . . ."

"You'd have seen," he retorted boldly, "that you've forced me to pay you the greatest compliment that any man can pay any woman. Now I shall say good-night . . ."

The pressure of her hand tightened.

"I don't understand, I'm afraid. And I can't let you run away till you've at least explained . . ."

"The running away is the explanation and the compliment!," he laughed.

3

Arthur made his way to the long gallery with a feeling of escape. At the moment he was agreeably excited; but he suspected that, when he met Lady Knighton at breakfast, he would regret his late essay in gallantry. To tell any woman, on three hours' acquaintance, that one could not risk one's peace of mind by trying to live in the same house with her was a startling avowal; and, though he meant it when he said it, there was no excuse for saying it.

"I may be thankful," he reflected, "that she didn't tell me to keep speeches of that kind for people who would appreciate them better."

The sooner he faced the facts of his position, the better; and the salient facts were that, as a member of the Grasshoppers Cricket Club, he was being privileged to spend a long week-end at Moulton Castle, after which he would take up his duties again at Brampton College, as games-

master and spiritual director of the under fifth, with a salary of £400 a year, free rooms and board. Within a week Lady Knighton would have forgotten his very name. If she remembered it in a year's time when Gin-Fizz was arranging his tour, he could only pray that she would not exclaim: "*Arthur Camelford? Oh, that was the gawky schoolmaster who ran away for fear he might fall in love with me!*"

"Talking to women ain't my long suit," he decided, pausing to examine his reflection. "I *have* to blurt out whatever comes into my head; and I'm altogether too bony and battered to play the simple, prattling child. I shouldn't be in the least surprised if Lady Knighton thought I was tight. Well, it can't be helped. She shouldn't have taken me into her confidence quite so much. The things I've heard to-night make me want to say: '*Are you mad or am I?*'"

When he reached his destination, under escort by successive night-watchmen who put him in mind of policemen shepherding a lost child, Arthur found that the duke, if not restored to good-humour, was at least rendered innocuous by slumber. Bridge was being played at three candle-lit tables and poker at a fourth, while the rest of the party had gathered into a loose conversational group between the two big fires. Listening to the familiar sound of "Jack pot! Somebody's shy" contending with the more sedate "Four hearts? I double four hearts!", Arthur wondered whether the duke's port had in fact gone to his head and made him imagine the strange confidences which he seemed to have been receiving. This was much more the scene which he had expected to find, when the women retired: a scene of green tables, pipes and long tumblers, of fire-light and grey smoke, of red faces

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and sleek heads. It was a healthily barbarian society of two-and-twenty men who had come here to play cricket and whose business it was, until they returned to work at the end of the tour, to be in the house and not of it.

“ I’ll see you! Four kings? O my Lord! ”

“ Popular win! Popular win! ”

Arthur looked at the heavy, purple face of his captain, now bent over a scoring block: what would old Gin-Fizz think if he could have heard their conversation upstairs? How would it sound if retailed, by one of his spies, to the little old duke sleeping in front of the fire with a smile of innocence on his now rosy face! Of innocence, or of most devilish understanding, Arthur corrected himself; as though he were not asleep at all and could hear through stone walls and read a half-formed thought . . . If it came to that, what would these others make of the ugly little passage in which the old man tried to bully his “ little granddaughter ”? There was no question of imagining that; and this “ Sire de Malétroit ”, like his namesake, was the more formidable for having two faces and manners, if not two personalities. A sort of Count Fosco . . . Indeed, the whole atmosphere of the castle was reminiscent of a Victorian “ thriller ”.

“ Hullo, Camel! I thought you’d gone to bed,” Gin-Fizz exclaimed, standing up—as dummy—to mix himself a drink.

“ I’ve been talking to Lady Knighton. I say, I didn’t understand that her husband usually played for you. If he’s coming here and you’d care for me to stand down . . . ”

“ So that you can go on talking to his lady?,” Steeping interrupted with a grin. “ No, we can’t spare you, my

boy. Knighton used to be quite a decent player," he continued in an undertone, "but the last year or two he's been seeing rather more balls than were actually being bowled and not always going for the right one."

Arthur nodded with an expression that was intended to be tolerantly understanding. As one who preached and practised the doctrine of complete physical fitness, he was secretly horrified by men who let themselves go to pieces, but his asceticism was becoming a subject of mockery with the rest of the Grasshoppers' side.

"From Lady Knighton's account of Stourgrove," he answered, "the place is enough to drive any man to drink. It's bad luck on her . . ."

Gin-Fizz raised his eyebrows and took a long pull at his whiskey-and-soda.

"I've never heard that he lets her down in public. And, so long as he keeps up appearances, I don't think she worries about him. They've drifted apart so completely . . ."

"Ah, I didn't know that! "

Arthur felt tempted to say that he did not want to hear any more, but it was idle to check Gin-Fizz when he interested himself in other people's business.

"Knighton's always been a pretty notorious petticoat-hunter. Ever since he was a boy. I believe Cynn timer Leveret's the latest to take his roving fancy. If so, I foresee trouble."

"You mean, she has a husband of her own? "

"Not at the moment, but she's ready for another. And, as she's begged, borrowed and stolen enough for two, our venerable friend opposite couldn't stop them if Lady Knighton went for a divorce. I don't know why she doesn't. The prospect of being a duchess can't have

much charm for her. Either get rid of him or bring him to heel, say I. He's still quite fairly in love with her. If she doesn't . . ."

He broke off, as three impatient voices recalled him to his table, and Arthur glanced across at Lord Gillingham wondering how any one could allow a girl to marry into a family of admitted profligates. To be sure, it was no concern of his! In a week's time he would be asleep in his rooms overlooking the bishop's palace at Brampton; and this unfamiliar world in which he was sojourning for two-and-seventy hours would be more remote than the world of a dream. Remote; and yet a thousand times more vivid than the other worlds to which he had been introduced in the last three weeks. This one alone gave him a sense of drama.

And, when he came to think of it, that was the impression which he had been trying to define ever since the beginning of dinner. There was a conflict in the air, a struggle between two traditions personified in the old duke and Lady Knighton, with subordinate struggles—not yet accorded their place—between her and her husband, between her husband and the lady known as "Cynn timer Leveret", between "Cynn timer Leveret" and the old man.

"All too complicated for me. I'm better off as I am . . ."

A voice at a distant table proclaimed: "Three tricks! Which gives us the game. *And* rubber." While the score was being added, Lord Gillingham stood up to ask if no one would care to take his place; and, as the table rearranged itself, Arthur decided that there could never be any question—with Lady Knighton's frail and vaguely ineffectual father—of "allowing" anything; and it

seemed more than doubtful whether a high-spirited girl on the threshold of marriage would listen to advice, even about a "notorious petticoat-hunter." A nice question, this, what a man should do when his daughter—or grandson, for the matter of that!—wanted to marry some one who was obviously unsuitable. Arthur felt thankful that none of his old pupils ever asked his opinion of their prospective brides. At Brampton a man's experience of women was limited to the wives of other masters, who only talked about domestic economy, and the mothers of pupils, who only talked about their sons. The staff, carrying on the tradition which they had acquired as boys, contemptuously excluded women from their conversation, if not from their thoughts.

"Aren't you going to give yourself a drink?"

Arthur looked up to find Lord Gillingham standing over him.

"I really think I've had all that's good for me," he answered. "May I get you anything, sir?"

"No, thank you! No, thank you! I was afraid you were perhaps being neglected. There was such a forbidding frown . . ."

"I was only thinking!," Arthur laughed. "Term begins next week . . . The new boys are left with us, to be 'equipped for life', as the phrase runs. I was wondering how many of us in that most monastic society are fit to teach *anything!*"

Lord Gillingham smiled and drew up a chair:

"I suspect Moyra of undermining your faith."

"No, sir, I thought of this for myself. As a class, we schoolmasters know less than nothing of women, for example, and yet we're responsible for boys who will spend the rest of their lives meeting or avoiding them, working

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with them and trying, trying to establish a *modus vivendi*. We know nothing about money. So with everything else that makes up what one calls 'life'. It's odd! "

"Don't you think these things correct themselves to some extent in the holidays? We elders talk about everything much more frankly than my parents ever did. And young people meet so freely and easily . . ."

"Which makes them good companions, for the holidays. It doesn't teach any kind of sex-diplomacy. If you judge by the number of divorces . . ."

Standing up, Arthur fetched himself a tumbler of soda-water and refilled his pipe. Now that it was too late, he recognized that any talk of discordant marriages must be dangerous in this house.

"You're doing your part," said Lord Gillingham on his return, "if you can teach the young of either sex not to think always of themselves." Involuntarily his glance shifted to the duke's place. "It's impatience and selfishness that we have to overcome more than any new lack of understanding between women and men."

"You don't think there's a new sex-rivalry since women were given votes and admitted to the professions? "

"No more than in my childhood, when married women for the first time were being allowed to have property of their own . . ."

A deep snore from the doubled-up little figure by the fire caused Lord Gillingham to stop, with a smile. The noise seemed so apt an expression of the old man's contempt for people who called themselves men and allowed a pack of women to upset them with nonsense about equality.

"I was just congratulating myself," said Arthur, "that my pupils didn't come to me for advice on these subjects."

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"If they did, you might ask them what *motive* they have in marrying.

'*There are five reasons why men wed:*','
he improvised.

"'*Love, wealth, the shade of boredom nigh,
' Or lest the shade come by-and-by,
' Or any other reason why*'.

Any one of the last four makes me uneasy, Camelford. Are you much of a novel-reader?"

"Whenever I can get time."

"Then don't you wish that our psychological specialists could occasionally get away from their sex-obsession to consider some of the other things that bring men and women together. Fear is one . . ."

"The girl's fear of being left an old maid?"

"And, since so many of us have lost faith in immortality, the man's fear of dying without leaving any part of him behind. There's the fear of loneliness, the fear of insecurity. I personally believe that far more women marry from motives of ambition or of pity than from what I understand you young people call the 'sex-urge' . . ."

He broke off as a clerkly youth came in and approached the duke, coughing uneasily.

"Ambition I can understand," said Arthur.
"Pity . . . ?"

He checked as he recalled Lady Knighton's odd admission that she had married because she was "so sorry" for her husband.

"We must accept that. I don't think any man is capable of understanding it. The maternal instinct,

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directed towards a grown man for the appealing helplessness which the weakest of the other sex sees in the strongest of ours . . . Surely that's Charlie's secretary-valet person? ”

As Arthur turned his head, the duke roused with a start and sat blinking like an owl brought in out of the night. With returning consciousness his face lost its death-mask composure and became wrinkled with a myriad lines; but, as at Arthur's presentation before dinner, the body seemed to function some moments before the brain began to work. The secretary had to say three times that Lord Knighton had arrived and was changing his clothes; and even then the old man would only grumble that his grandson had said he was coming in the morning.

“ His lordship finished his work sooner than he expected, your grace,” the secretary explained. “ I was to tell your grace that everything had been arranged satisfactorily. The house is being dismantled to-morrow, your grace.”

“ To-morrow? Good, good, good!,” the duke commented sleepily. “ Has Lady Knighton been told? Ne'er mind! I'll give myself the pleasure of telling her myself.”

4

As the secretary withdrew, Arthur turned to study his companion's face. Maybe his imagination was again getting out of hand, but the old man's drowsy voice had sounded malicious, as though he were promising himself his revenge for the defeat which he had sustained earlier in the evening. It was difficult, indeed, to see what spiteful use could be made of the bald statement that some

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piece of business had been finished, but Arthur could not forget Lady Knighton's warning that nothing in this house was done without a purpose.

Lord Gillingham, at least, seemed elated—in his gentle way—at the secretary's announcement.

"This should be a feather in Charlie's cap," he murmured with the first flicker of enthusiasm that he had exhibited that night.

"I only heard that everything was satisfactorily arranged," Arthur replied.

"It's the first big thing he's been allowed to handle, a sale to the Birmingham corporation. I don't understand the details, but there was about a million involved. From all accounts, Charlie's shaping to be a very good man of business."

"He'll need to be if he's going to carry through many million-pound deals."

"I don't suppose it's a weekly occurrence, but the duke owns a tremendous lot of land all over the midlands. I shouldn't mind *owning* it," Lord Gillingham continued with a whimsical gleam in his blue eyes, "but I should draw the line at having to look after it on the spot. The Black Country, you know, and all the least lovely, most industrialized parts of Warwickshire and Worcestershire. Moyra's very good about it, but no one would live in a place like Stourgrove for choice. I shall hope to see rather more of her now."

"They're moving to London?"

"I understand the duke's making over Leominster House to them. There's quite a considerable estate about Hampstead and Highgate, waiting to be developed. Ah, here's Charlie!"

Arthur turned to the opening door with mixed feel-

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ings. However often he told himself it was no business of his, he could not overcome his instinctive distaste for any man who could leave any wife for furtive amours and debauches; at the same time he was eager to see the man that Lady Knighton had married and to discover, if he could, why she had married him. Gillingham's talk about the "helplessness" that all women discerned in all men was good enough for an academic debate on the sexes, but it had no bearing on the puffy, self-satisfied original of the photograph on the piano upstairs. Knighton looked very well able to take care of himself, though he was coming into the room at this moment with all the diffidence of a boy asking to be let off an imposition. No doubt the old duke was responsible for that. Though it was now within a few minutes of midnight, the fellow had put on evening clothes, in obedience to some rigid rule of the house, acquired in childhood; and the timidity of childhood survived—Arthur fancied—in the stiffness with which a man of fully five-and-thirty crossed the room to his grandfather's chair like a private of the Guards.

What was it Lady Knighton had said about "stage-management"? It was with the punctilio of an old Guards officer who remembered Wellington's death that the duke returned his grandson's stiff bow.

"Ye know every one here?," he asked with a fluttering movement of one hand. "No! There's Captain Hancock and Mr. Camelford ye've still to meet. Well, ye're earlier than I expected."

"You told me to hurry things on, sir, so that the house could be vacant well before quarter-day. I've made all arrangements; and the servants are now only waiting for me to telegraph."

The duke nodded and continued to nod as though he were falling asleep again ;

"Quite right, quite right, quite right! We'll talk about that to-morrow. I'm glad ye've come, my boy; there's a deal of work waiting for 'ee."

"I'm ready to start off as soon as you tell me, sir," Knighton replied.

"Start off? Oh, aye! To London! I've been thinking that it might perhaps be better if ye came here for a time. I shall have to pension off that fellow Carter, but I'd like him to shew 'ee round the estate-office before he goes . . ."

Under his parade-ground passivity Arthur could see Knighton flinching. If they disagreed on every other point, he and his wife were clearly at one in not wishing to live under the eye of the duke; and the unwonted persuasiveness of the old man's tone suggested either that he knew he was administering unpalatable medicine or else that he was blandly breaking a promise.

"The estate-office?," the younger man repeated rather blankly.

"Aye! It's a happy chance. Moyra and the boys must have somewhere to live; and I've not yet made any proper arrangements about the London house. . . . However, we mustn't weary our guests with family business. Ye'd like something to eat and drink after your journey."

Accepting his dismissal, young Knighton turned to greet his father-in-law and then mixed himself a whiskey-and-soda, which he drank in thirsty gulps. Once free of his grandfather's domination, he relaxed his parade-ground stiffness and began to exhibit a personality of his own, plunging into a technical description of the sales

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and exchanges which he had been effecting for the last four months. Arthur was constrained to admit that the fleshy young man knew his subject and his own mind. He looked out of condition, in that highly trained company, and he mixed his whiskey-and-soda without making extravagant demands on the soda, but he seemed so well armed at all points that it was difficult to understand why any woman should marry him out of "pity".

"Truth to tell, the work was done when my grandfather fixed his minimum," Knighton was explaining. "I mean to say, they blathered a lot, but I told 'em they must take it or leave it. I got my price. I always knew I should. I mean to say . . ."

"And it's good-bye to Stourgrove?," asked Lord Gillingham.

"Yes, thank God. Truth to tell, sir . . ."

"Do I gather you're settling here?," Gin-Fizz enquired.

Knighton glanced covertly over his shoulder before answering.

"That seems to be my grandfather's idea," he muttered. "I don't know, I'm sure, what Moyra will say to it. I mean to say, he's promised us the London house . . . If he's retiring old Carter, I suppose he'll want me to take over here. He's far too old to run the show himself . . ."

If it had not been for that one moment of blankness, Arthur would have said that Knighton was indifferent to his fate and perhaps long prepared for it. His phrases sounded like an echo of his wife, who was herself an echo of the duke. Had she not said that, when the old man could no longer look after his affairs, they must settle here to look after them for him? To be sure, she had also said that, with luck, this would not arise for

some years yet, but perhaps the duke felt that this was the moment of all moments—with one house shutting and another not yet open—to get them under his eye.

“If so, he really is the most monstrous little tyrant . . . ,” Arthur told himself with mingled admiration and resentment. “It’s no affair of mine, of course”

5

On the first stroke of twelve and with that touch of theatricality which Arthur had already found faintly absurd, a detachment of footmen appeared with four trays of silver candle-sticks. The duke chirruped a good-night to his guests and disappeared to his own apartments. The footmen, magnificently led by the groom of the chambers, went out and came back with snuffers on poles, which they directed to the chandeliers. And Lord Knighton, gulping the last of his final drink, opined that it was “time to turn in”.

“Something between a Russian ballet and a sternly organized school-treat,” murmured Hancock.

“And the evening and the morning,” Arthur replied, suddenly on edge, “are only the first day.”

They had now, he calculated as he wound his watch, been at Moulton Castle for somewhat more than five hours. Well, the famous dinner-party at the Guermites, to which Marcel Proust gave an entire volume, must have lasted a shorter time than that, but it took days to read and must have taken months to write. If he himself had been able to describe these five hours as he would have liked, Arthur felt that they would take five years to write and five weeks to read. They had exhausted

him, though, and made him most infernally restless. Or perhaps it was all that port on top of all that champagne.

Climbing into the wedge-shaped embrasure of the window, he looked out on the shadowy mass of the great castle. The broad, flat space below him must be a part of the battlements; and the projecting quadrilateral with the courtyard inside was clearly the gate-house wing, where Lady Rhayader lived. In one of the two towers, blackly frowning in the face of the moon, Lady Knighton was presumably sleeping with her "little princes"; sleeping, or being wakened to hear that the duke had changed his mind and that they were to stay there indefinitely.

There could be no question about it: the old man deserved his name. It was impressive to see how Knighton stood to attention before his Roman grandfather and took his orders without a murmur. That, no doubt, was the model on which the "little princes" were to be trained; and that was one of the many things that Lady Knighton just would not tolerate. . . .

Arthur turned at a knock on the door and found that Gin-Fizz, who never went to bed if he could make an excuse for staying up, had—as usual—come to finish his last drink and pipe in company.

"I just looked in to see you were all right," he explained. "It's a bore, but we're expected to come down to breakfast all dolled-up. You change into flannels afterwards."

"So long as we don't have to play in top-hats . . . Though that would all be in the picture! Another service in the chapel, I think you said, before we're allowed any food? "

"And see to it you're not late, young Camell . . . Is it at all what you expected? "

Arthur shook his head and came down from the embrasure.

"I wouldn't have missed it all for anything," he answered, "but I don't think I should care to stay here for long. For the matter of that, I don't fancy any one would."

"Well, my tastes are simple, apart from food and drink. Formality bores me. I suppose if you've been born and brought up to it . . ."

"Like Knighton, for instance? He looked pretty blue when the old boy seconded him for duty here."

"Ah, but there's a reason for that!," Gin-Fizz chuckled. "What do the scriptures say? 'Where a man's treasure is, there will his heart be also.' Charlie Knighton's heart being engaged elsewhere, he doesn't at all relish being separated indefinitely from his latest little treasure. I was telling you downstairs that Cynn timer Leveret is supposed to have him in tow . . ."

"I suppose that comes to an end, if he lives here? "

"I've no doubt the old man intends it shall. He too may have thought it strange that Knighton should have to conduct so much of his Birmingham business in London, with Cynn timer to help him. I imagine the duke thought things were getting serious. Like so many entirely immoral men, he believes in the indestructibility of the marriage-tie. You've not met Cynn timer? Nor Dick Leveret? He's dead now, of course. Nor Cornwallis, her first husband, who ran away with the younger Seton girl? . . ."

From the experience of the last fortnight, Arthur knew that, when Gin-Fizz was fully wound, it was impossible to stop him and almost impossible even to direct the flow of his chatter. Names, anecdotes, more names, a quota-

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tion or two, still more names poured out of him in a cascade of genial defamation. He knew all gossip and had invented half of it; but such verisimilitude surrounded his stories that, though he repeated himself interminably, he always told the same story in approximately the same words. And now for twenty minutes he regaled his companion with a chapter of social history which left Arthur helplessly wondering whether in a certain good-natured world any husband ever lived with his own wife and whether any children ever had a right to the names they bore.

"As man to man, is there a word of truth in all this?," Arthur enquired brutally, when Gin-Fizz stopped for breath.

"As intelligent man to most unintelligent camel," was the retort, "I should like to know just where Brampton is. When next I want a retreat, I shall go there. My dear boy, I haven't told you a thing that isn't common knowledge. Whether it's come to Lady Knighton's ears I can't tell you, but the duke seems to know all about it and he's made all his arrangements—very cleverly!—for stopping it. You heard him say he was changing his agent? That's a polite way of telling Charlie Knighton: '*Gated till further notice, all exeats stopped*', or whatever punishment you hand out to your miserable little pupils. How long he'll stand it . . ."

"I should have thought it was more to the point to consider how long Lady Knighton would stand it," said Arthur.

"I told you downstairs: she doesn't bother so long as he keeps up appearances. And he'll have no chance of doing anything else while he's under grandpapa's eye."

"I meant: I was wondering how long she'd consent

to stay here. I gather she's not greatly in love with the place."

"She'll stay as long as it suits the old man's convenience to keep her here. You've been here long enough to see whose writ runs in this house. If she and Knighton became reconciled to-morrow, Cynn timer Leveret would fade out; and the old man would tell them to go their ways in peace. So long as Lady Knighton locks her door against her lawfully wedded husband, you can't be surprised if he goes wandering."

Arthur pulled off his coat and tossed it over a chair. It was idle to be angry with old Gin-Fizz, but he could hardly trust himself to speak when Lady Knighton was held responsible for her husband's infidelities and made to share his punishment.

"I wonder they don't strike a bargain. If Knighton wants this other woman, he could ask his wife to divorce him. The old man could do nothing if they combined against him. And you say this Mrs. Leveret has plenty of money."

"But Lady Knighton doesn't want a scandal, for the sake of the children. So long as appearances are maintained, she won't move. The duke knows that and will take good care there *isn't* a scandal. It wouldn't suit his book at all for a wild colonial to be given undisputed control of the children. No, there'll be no divorce unless she drives Knighton desperate. Let her forgive him and agree to make a fresh start. After all, it isn't the first time this sort of thing has happened. As I told you, there was the Hennington woman and the Italian *marchesa* and the woman they called the Queen of Kentucky. Knighton always became the model husband when there wasn't a chance of being anything else.

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Mark you, I think his lady has been a good bit to blame . . .”

“Only for marrying him, surely?”

“No! *Having* married him, she should have made some allowances.”

“When in a farm-yard, live as other farm-yard animals do?,” Arthur suggested.

“She’s much too cold for anything of that kind.”

“I should have said she was much too decent.”

Gin-Fizz grinned over the rim of his tumbler:

“We won’t quarrel over a word. D’you know, Camel, I suspect you’re falling rather in love with her! Don’t say we didn’t warn you. How many of my most promising young men have said to me: ‘Why on earth did she marry Knighton?’ I’m afraid I can’t hold out the slightest hope. She’s the exasperating type of whom one has to say ultimately: ‘*She’s as good as she’s beautiful.*’ Don’t be misled by a manner which—on my word of honour—means nothing. I should never forgive myself if you were turned away from your seminary for writing impassioned poetry when you should have been correcting exercises. Remind yourself that in four days’ time you’ll have said good-bye, probably for ever . . .”

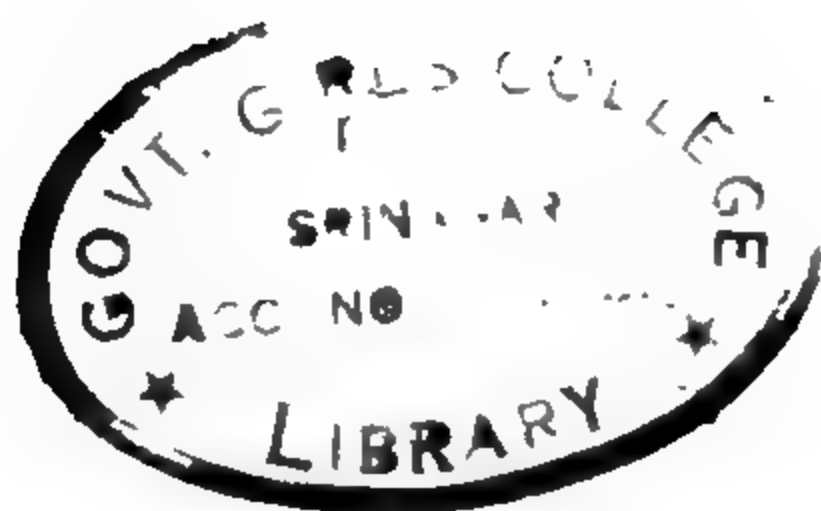
“That’s not necessarily true,” Arthur interrupted.

“I’ve been invited to tutor her boys.”

“Now, by Jove, this is *really* a thrill!,” Gin-Fizz exclaimed.

“By her *and* by the duke. I shall disappoint you terribly when I tell you that I’ve refused. Now I’m going to turn you out.”

PART TWO



CHAPTER ONE

A DISTANT PROSPECT OF BRAMPTON COLLEGE

I

WHEN he came to look back on his one visit to Moulton Castle—Arthur was equally sure that he would not be invited again and that, if he were, he would refuse the invitation—, his first emotion was a melancholy which he had not felt in leaving any other house on the tour and which he was unable either to define or to justify. The pleasures of the week-end were indeed checkered in retrospect by an abiding sense of physical discomfort, a persistent feeling of awkwardness and an uncomfortable expectancy of trouble: at the end, as at the beginning, one sighed for the liberty of the local inn. At the same time he was haunted by the fear that he was letting slip an opportunity that would not come his way again.

Impossible to say when he first became conscious of the fear! Perhaps after breakfast on the last day, when the Quidnuncs—who had two more matches in Radnorshire—were all saying good-bye and he contrasted the schoolmaster's lot with the life—rich, independent and amusing!—to which these others would go back at the end of the week. Perhaps a little later, when Lady Knighton brought her boys to thank him for bowling to them and he realized how in their different ways she and her father and Moulton and Eddie had all "adopted"

him. Perhaps later still, when Knighton—shaking hands—said with rather surprising cordiality: “I wish Moyra could have persuaded you to chuck your present job. I mean to say, she has such exalted ideas that I can’t live up to ’em! I mean to say, carting our boys round the picture-galleries and opera-houses of Europe, what? Give me a country where I can understand what people are saying to me . . .” For a moment Arthur had felt himself tempted. To live luxuriously, to visit distant cities that now existed only in his dreams, to exchange the thinly-veiled enmities of school and the unveiled indifference of his home for a society where he was actively and openly wanted! For that, surely, it was worth temporizing and offering to come in six months’ time if he were still needed.

Loitering moodily in the great hall while the last complimentary speeches were exchanged, Arthur could not understand why he had refused so uncompromisingly. He had definitely not fallen in love with Lady Knighton; but, if he had, this would have made no difference. The more he saw of her—and they had argued endlessly at meals, on the battlements, in the gallery and under the elm-trees of the cricket-field—the more coldly unapproachable she seemed. It was rather a feeling of inadequacy that frightened him away. Among the personal cross-currents and temperamental undertows of Moulton an “unworldly scholastic”—as Gin-Fizz delighted to call him—could hardly hope to keep afloat. “*Suave mari magno*,” he was tempted to quote when the duke tried to change him from a spectator into a participant, “*vexantibus æquora ventis E terra magnum alterius spectare laborem*.”

Even without Gin-Fizz to supply the missing names and bridge the initial gaps in the argument, Arthur had

been confirmed hour by hour in his early impression that a grim struggle was taking place if any one had the wit or the curiosity to see it. A line was at this moment being added to the drama by their host, as he told his departing guests in turn that, if they were alive in twelve months' time, they would all be meeting there again; another, not intended for anybody on the stage, by Lady Knighton, who murmured that they would certainly not all be there in twelve months' time, but that—with any luck—a few of them might be dead. Yes, an eruption was overdue.

A slow procession of cars wound into the courtyard; and Arthur went to take his leave in the audience-chamber where he had been received. Was it only four days ago?

"I hope to welcome 'ee here in twelve months' time, if we're all alive," chirruped the old man. "' *Labuntur anni* ', though . . ."

"I shall certainly come if you're kind enough to invite me, sir," Arthur replied.

"But I *count* on 'ee!"

The cordiality of the duke's voice was so emphatic that Arthur did not know whether to write him down an artist in hypocrisy or a man of quick wrath and quicker forgetfulness. There had been a moment, less than twenty-four hours before, when he had really seemed to stand in peril of his life. Daily and in all weathers, according to Lady Knighton, there was a brief perambulation of the battlements under the leadership of the old man, who ceremoniously walked a few steps with each of his guests in turn, enquiring how they had slept, pointing out the landmarks of the countryside and then pausing to effect a change of partner. No one, after spending three nights and two days at the castle, had any excuse for failing to grasp the intricacies of this stiff little parade; but Arthur,

after a spirited rally of inanities, had mistakenly felt himself to be dismissed and at liberty to drop out of the procession. Straying ahead with the little Moulton boys, he had rounded a corner and looked down for a moment on a square of green enclosed by spiked walls. In a wheeled chair, pushed by an attendant, sat a bald and bearded man with a child's wooden engine on his knees. Almost before his eyes had communicated the sight to his brain, Arthur found the duke seizing his arm and warning him that this end of the battlements was unsafe. The fury in the old man's glare was made more terrifying by the silken suavity of his voice. It was hardly extravagant to imagine his whispering, a moment later, to a hired assassin: "*Get rid of this youth. He has seen . . .*" Like the "Sire de Malétroit", he could "at least stop the scandal."

By this alone, Arthur knew, he had forfeited his chance of being invited again, unless indeed the old man—whose brain seemed so curiously detached from his body till a bottle or two of wine brought them together—had forgotten the whole episode. And, if he had, he would assuredly remember it in the next twelve months. Best, therefore, to regard the freedom of the castle as rescinded. By the time the imminent eruption had subsided and the duke found leisure to recall his late party, Arthur calculated that he himself would be sitting at a raised desk, taking the under fifth in Aristophanes or Cicero and recollected at Moulton—if he were recollected at all—as the man who had committed the sin for which there was no forgiveness. He was on his way back to Brampton now, convoyed by Gin-Fizz to Hereford and thereafter left to find his way to Leamington, where he was to lunch with his mother and collect

clothes before proceeding to his midland city of dreaming spires beside the sluggish Bream.

The distant prospect of Brampton College was perhaps, more than anything else, the cause of his vague regret in leaving Moulton Castle. At eight o'clock that night he would be dining with Dr. Irving, who always tried to postpone the animosities of the coming term by shewing his staff what likable fellows they really were. After dinner, his colleagues would all be comparing notes on the last two months. There would not, Arthur felt, be much to tell other people about this visit to Moulton; but, as he turned his head for a last view of the castle against the skyline, he could not help wondering what he would be telling himself in a week's time. That he had thrown away his great chance? That he was still unwontedly disinclined for work?

Or that the routine of form-room, chapel, fields and common-room had restored him to his senses? If he was going to be unsettled by a few pleasant weeks in other people's houses, he had better decline the next invitation to tour with the Grasshoppers; and certainly the last few days had revived the melancholy—half pain, half pleasure—which he used to feel at the end of a ball when the band could not be cajoled into playing longer. The place had made him thoroughly sentimental! Two sides of the Brampton playing-fields were fringed with elms; and he had thought of them as he listened to the ground-bass of cawing rooks above the Moulton cricket-ground. When next he heard the rooks of Brampton cawing in the elms, would he at once think of the shaded corner where he had sat with Lady Knighton, awaiting his turn to bat?

"Well, I told you the old boy would do you well," said Gin-Fizz with a liverish yawn.

"And no one will charge you with exaggeration," Arthur replied. "In two days I shall be panting in pursuit of a football. The ground will be like iron; and I shall be as fat as a pig."

"I can rely on you for next year?"

"That's very kind of you. Is it always the same tour?"

"Unless any of our open-handed hosts are so inconsiderate as to die in the interval."

"But you don't anticipate that fate for the old duke? I confess I can't see why he ever *should* die; and, if he's still going strong, I rather think I shan't be wanted. Strange as it may seem, Gin-Fizz, I fear he's taken a dislike to me . . ."

"*Dislike?* My good Camel, you were the success of the party!," his companion returned. "The old boy told me this morning about this job he wants you to take on. I thought you were ragging the other night. . . . No, my lad, this engaging modesty prevents your doing yourself full justice. You won the heart of Gillingham . . ."

"He's a pet!," said Arthur. "I'm going to stay with him for Christmas, if I'm not in Switzerland."

"And I suppose you're going to Stourgrove for your long leave or *exeat* or whatever you call it at Brampton."

Though he could feel that his cheeks were flushing, Arthur knew that to lose his temper would only stimulate his companion to more annoying flights of persiflage.

"I can't very well go till I'm asked," he replied. "And they can't very well ask me for November if they're giving up the house this month."

"But who says they are? You've made a strange picture of your little friend if you think she would take kindly to being sent about like a parcel. I have her word

for it—an hour ago—that she's going back to Stourgrove till her presumed lord and master finds her another home. It's a pretty foul place; but, if Knighton's confined to barracks at Moulton, she and her beloved boys would at least have it to themselves till they've decided whether they want a reconciliation. I should have thought the present cold snap had continued long enough! You know they've not lived together since the second boy—what's his name? Eddie?—was born."

Not for the first time in the history of their brief friendship, Arthur was uncertain whether to be amused or infuriated by his companion's air of easy omniscience.

"I *didn't* know it," he answered, "and I don't see how you can be so cocksure . . ."

"For the excellent reason that Knighton himself told me," Gin-Fizz replied smoothly. "I met him on the Riviera two or three years ago with a woman not his wife; and he seemed to feel he must justify himself. While the second child was on the way, he had amused himself with some fairy and Lady Knighton had told him that he'd better go on amusing himself in the same way. I think she was a fool . . ."

"Until I've had to bring a child into the world," said Arthur, "I won't express an opinion."

"My good Camel, she threw away her one hold over him. As she's likely to find out in the next few months. Knighton was fond of her, in his absent-minded way; and between a woman who wants you for the sake of appearances and a woman who means to have you for the sake of ending up as Duchess of Leominster . . . After all, Cynn timer Leveret has been everything from the wife of a casino-proprietor to the mistress of a Balkan king. What she wants she usually gets. . . . Well, here we

are in Hereford! Life's very amusing, Camel. You'd like to be dropped at the station? "



For most of the way to Leamington, Arthur occupied himself with a bundle of books and papers which he had been carrying about, unopened, since the beginning of the holidays. There was a school-roll, with a list of the texts to be read by the under fifth, and the manuscript of his leading article for the *Bramptonian* on the past season's cricket. The new term was rushing to meet him; and, by the time he had written his bread-and-butter letter to the duchess, Moulton Castle would seem very remote.

It was already! And yet, as he stared at a photograph of the school-buildings, Arthur found himself comparing the Tudor windows of hall with those of the long gallery where he had sat talking to Lord Gillingham the first night and to his daughter the second afternoon. He wished to Heaven that he could have done something for her! When they said good-bye, she looked such a child—with her bare arms and her short skirt—to be contending single-handed with the duke and her blustering husband and her mother-in-law and the crushing weight of tradition which they all represented.

It would have been pleasant to find a confidant—more sympathetic than the cynical Gin-Fizz—with whom he could discuss the late party; but such an one, he knew, was not to be found in Leamington. Since the death of her husband, Mrs. Camelford had assumed—as her life's work—the protection of the ecclesiastical polity which the canon had served for fifty years. She was only interested

in her children from a sense of duty, in their friends not at all; and she would sleep through the drama now playing at Moulton until a chance mention of divorce provided her with an opportunity of stating the correct attitude of the church to marriage.

What that might be Arthur could not precisely remember, as he was less concerned with the rules of his mother's game than with the fervour which she expended on it. Enviably indeed was the temperament of any one who could extract so much busy and innocent happiness from what seemed to him tremendous trifles. Her conversation was all of episcopal appointments, the revised prayer-book and the prospects of disestablishment. With her clergyman son Philip she maintained an endless evangelical warfare on the use and abuse of "communion" and "eucharist", "communion-table" and "altar", "Catholics" and "Roman Catholics". The saving of a soul mattered less than the language in which salvation was achieved; and in company with her unmarried daughter Margaret she was resigned to seeing her other children drift—like her soldier son Horace and her married daughter Irene—into scepticism and indifference rather than that they should race into the toils of Rome, like Philip, who complicated the "Catholic" and "Roman Catholic" vendetta by mispronouncing the word "cahtholic".

"It might, of course, have been bridge," Arthur reflected tolerantly. "She might be going from house to house telling her friends that she ought to have played a club last week. . . . Strange old lady!"

When he reached her house, Mrs. Camelford was inditing a letter of fierce felicitation to a bishop, unknown to her, who had lately refused to institute a priest

suspected of irregularity in the reservation of the sacrament. She interrupted herself to receive her youngest son in a hurried embrace, then returned with new gusto to her task. If his absence had been remarked in the last four weeks, it was evidently not worth a comment; and Arthur had to admit that he would have been embarrassed if she had affected any interest in his movements. That was outside the Camelford tradition! Tall, gaunt and self-contained, they all went about their own affairs as though each had concluded a pact of non-interference with his neighbour; and their conversation, when they all met under their mother's roof—which was a hunting-box for Horace, a nursery for Irene and her frequent babies and an asylum for Philip when he had been suspended by his bishop—consisted of five or six bravely sustained monologues to which no one else ever listened.

“A change after Moulton . . .,” Arthur commented privately.

There, to be sure, they had gone to the other extreme; and he was embarrassed to remember how frankly Lady Knighton and he had discussed themselves. At the same time, though the family would think he was sickening for something if he affected an interest in their doings, a touch of sympathy or affection would have cheered him on his way back to work. Though he whistled over his packing, Arthur could not pretend that he was anything but depressed. In a few weeks now the Bream would be sending up the first mists of autumn to shroud the grey stone of the college. In the common-room, between schools, he would be jostling his colleagues indecorously for a sight of the fire. How he hated the oncoming of winter! And how exhilarating it was to reflect that every September, as long as he lived, would end like this!

"I wonder if I've been a most awful ass . . . ," he mused.

It was strange to remember he had told that fellow Carruthers, the first night, that he would not change his work if he were paid! At the moment, he could not keep patience with people who were so shallowly satisfied with life. Horace with his regiment and his service club and his crazy hatred of "these damned politicians", Margaret with her bishop-baiting and heresy-hunting. Nor with those who were dissatisfied! The remembered oddities of his colleagues in common-room were beginning already to exasperate him. It was dinner-table rhetoric to prate about "the marvel of a boy's mind unfolding". The schoolmaster was a patchwork of inhibitions and privations. It was only in his holidays that he met live men; and he was lucky if even in his holidays he met a live woman.

Had he thrown away the opportunity of his life? As they sat down to luncheon, Arthur mentioned the duke's offer in the hope that some one would applaud him for declining it.

"I don't suppose Dr. Irving would want to stand in your way," said Mrs. Camelford. "When I saw him at the diocesan conference, he was regretting that he had no house to offer you. . . . It was a very interesting meeting, Arthur. Archdeacon Hornsby . . ."

"I could have named my own terms," Arthur continued. "Whenever I wanted to go abroad, I had only to say the word . . ."

"I believe the duke has some of the best shooting in England," Horace contributed. "If you could have got me an invitation . . ."

"His presentations to livings have been occasionally

rather odd," said Margaret with a sniff. "Why did you refuse, Arthur?"

"I didn't feel I should be altogether comfortable. Not that they didn't all combine to give me a wonderful time . . ."

He repeated "a wonderful time", five hours later, to the two colleagues whom he found collecting letters in the common-room; and he said it again when the headmaster came out of the bursary and enquired if he had had pleasant holidays.

"You've just come from Moulton, haven't you?," Dr. Irving asked. "A marvellous place, we are told."

"Astonishing," Arthur replied, wondering what bazaar-rumour had raced ahead of him and why the headmaster seemed incapable of using the first person singular. Was it fear of egotism? Did he always speak for his wife as well, or for the school, or for the cultivated world at large?

"We've never been there, though the duke has kindly invited us once or twice. He's one of our governors, you know. . . . Well, we're seeing you at dinner to-night, we hope? If you've any problems to bring up, this is the best time for discussing them informally."

As though to emphasize that term did not begin till the morrow, Dr. Irving, who was wearing a grey flannel coat and trousers with a black silk stock and clerical collar, took out a pipe and began to fill it in plain view of the nine boarding-houses that covered three sides of School Quadrangle.

"At eight o'clock, sir?," Arthur asked.

"That's what we told the others. By the way, Macklin is complaining, as usual, that the new scholarship boys are crowding him out in the upper remove: he'd like to send his half-dozen top boys up to you."

"I should love to have 'em, sir—the more the merrier—, if I may push my top three on to Brimley. That, or another form-room. Have you thought any more about converting the map-room in Founder's Library, sir?"

As the vista of a new term unrolled, Arthur found himself responding almost unconsciously to the old war-cries. If he could get the map-room, which faced east and south with a view of Brampton cathedral over the river and playing-fields, any of his elders and betters might have his present dingy quarters next to Hall, with their eternal savour of stale cooking.

"You were thinking of that for yourself?," asked the headmaster, with a tight-lipped smile. "Remind us about it at dinner. We conclude you want to stay?"

Arthur was startled into wondering whether Dr. Irving was possessed of occult powers which enabled him to read an unspoken thought or whether he was hinting at a bitter conviction that they would none of them be at their present work if they could make a living by breaking stones.

"Of course, sir!," he answered. "I don't quite . . ."

"We weren't sure. Hasn't the duke been trying to tempt you away? There was a letter this morning . . ."

"But I told him I was pledged to you, sir!"

Dr. Irving nodded and began to walk towards the cloisters:

"He complains that you were quite incorruptible and that your loyalty would be your undoing. Well, we don't at all want to lose you, Camelford, but we also don't want to stand in your way unduly. In five or six years' time you can fairly expect a house, but that is really the end of earthly ambition for you here. Provided you gave us reasonable notice, we should never feel you were deserting

us. At the same time, we don't want you to be dazzled by superficially glittering prospects . . ."

"I'm dazzled by that old gentleman's brazen determination to have his own way!," Arthur laughed. "When he can't get any farther with me, he comes to you! It's very flattering, but I hope he won't now go behind your back to the governing body, sir, and have me forcibly ejected!"

3

In his green-panelled, Georgian rooms over the cloisters leading to chapel, Arthur composed a letter of thanks to the duchess and then, with one eye on the clock, began mechanically to unpack his clothes and arrange his books and photographs before dressing for dinner.

"No time to waste," he murmured to himself at intervals.

During the first hours of each term he had the same sense—of being swallowed whole—that he had experienced, more than a dozen years earlier, when the British army opened its mouth to receive him. There was a tradition or atmosphere about Brampton—no one knew whether Dr. Irving had inspired or been inspired by it—which took the whole of every one's time, in theory leaving the boys too busy for mischief and the masters for quarrelling. When he came to the end of his dressing with an unexpected quarter of an hour in hand, Arthur hurried to his class-room and chalked up the time-table of the week for his form to copy in the break instead of wasting first hour over it. Still with five minutes to fill, he dashed off a note to the new captain of football. "*What about a*

rule that first-eleven colours should be awarded afresh every season? I feel strongly that a captain should not be fettered in his choice by a number of old colours who may have lost their form entirely since the previous season . . .” And on his way out to dinner he posted an order for the books that his form would require.

“And now I can fraternize with my colleagues,” he murmured, as the clock over Great School began to strike eight and he set out through the cloisters at a trot. “As our strenuous head is so fond of telling us in chapel:

*‘If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run . . .’*”

As he shook hands with his colleagues, Arthur felt that the adventures and emotions of the last eight weeks, if indeed they had not happened to some one else, must really have happened to him in a dream. The “distant prospect” about which he had been muttering to himself all day was now of Moulton Castle; and it was dissolving more and more completely every time that he tried to look beyond the headmaster’s sombre drawing-room. These severely masculine dinners were like the last process in a complicated manufacture, when wheels and cylinders and driving-shaft were assembled into a single machine. The engine had been taken down at the end of July; it would be running again to-morrow; and, as each part was human, it sprang into place at a nod or word. Obedient to the unvarying command “Now, gentlemen, stand not upon the order of your going”, Arthur fell in at the rear of a procession led by the second master, whom no one ever dreamt of ousting; and on the injunction “Sit where you will! No ceremony!” he drifted towards the inglorious foot of the table until two of the senior house-

masters, immemorially estranged but ever jealous of their precedence, invited him to sit between them.

"Forward, shock-absorber!," he murmured.

They were all in the thick of it now! Woe unto Markham and Lowell, the juniors of the staff, if they had seated themselves on either side of the headmaster! Woe unto all, if Hazlitt and Benyon had been forced to remain in juxtaposition. Woe unto himself, too, if he had taken the armchair at the foot! In common-room, when the feast was over, little Ramsden—"not presuming to dogmatize, of course"—would remind whatever audience he could collect that in old days—"dear Dr. Normanby's time"—the second master presided over the other end of the table as a matter of course.

And yet, in some queer way, Brampton (though he kept telling himself he was "in the thick of it") remained "a distant prospect". As the headmaster said grace, Arthur's thoughts went back to the banqueting-hall at Moulton, where presumably the choir would soon be chanting to the duke's shrunken party. It was a chastening thought that, in enumerating the reasons why he could not leave Brampton at a moment's notice, he had not considered whether he would mind parting from a single one of the men with whom he had worked for more than a third of his life. Though every one here knew every one else only too well, they were bound solely by the ties of utility. For his Sunday walks across country Arthur depended on young Needham; and, in turn, Needham, Winstanley and Farmer depended on him for their fourth at bridge when Ramsden or Hazlitt failed. For the rest, they were no more united than prisoners in the same gaol, sharing a common resentment.

"Which is really what we are!," he whispered to him-

self. "It's the same close-quarters, the same monotony and—as time goes on—the same hopelessness."

Though he knew that he was doubling the score of petty annoyances by brooding over them beforehand, Arthur could not resist the morbid pleasure of reminding himself how many things always annoyed him. At the end of dinner the headmaster would raise his glass and call out: "The new term"; and a few of them, perhaps, would persuade themselves that this would not be like every other term. For himself, Arthur could not help repeating that phrase about "the limit of earthly ambitions" at Brampton. He would always be a poor man; he would gradually be reduced from football to fives and from racquets to golf; and, as age widened the chasm between his pupils and himself, they would lose their confidence in him and he would perhaps become petulantly envious of their youth. The same hopelessness probably overclouded his colleagues. . . .

If he had not been in such a hurry to reject Lady Knighton's proposal . . .

A rasping voice with a Belfast accent cut into his reverie:

"Camelford, I want to have a word with you some time about that boy Petersham in my house. You wrote him a pretty stiff report, you remember . . ."

"I did, Finnigan, I did! He's a lazy little brute," said Arthur.

"I daresay, but what's to be done with him? His ridiculous mother has been bombarding me with letters all the holidays. Is it any good sending him over to the modern side?"

"I should think it's all he's fit for . . . Oh, sorry, Cobden!"

Arthur found that his unguarded opinion had carried to the ears of the senior science-master, who reminded him caustically that the modern side possessed powers to exclude undesirable immigrants.

"I know we're a classical school," he added, "but to persistently treat the modern side as a dump for *your* failures . . ."

"I should never hand a boy over to the secular arm of science," purred the second master, "till he'd proved incapable of learning what a split infinitive was."

"Of such shibboleths is your boasted 'liberal education' compounded!," Cobden retorted.

Arthur was preparing to fling himself into the altercation when he recalled Lady Knighton's criticism that English schoolmasters of the present day for some queer reason taught only medieval subjects, with his own jocular defence that this was their sole stock-in-trade. The memory of her words brought back the setting in which they had been uttered. It would be interesting to know what the old man had said in his letter to Irving!

"You told me to remind you about the map-room, sir. May I arrange that with the bursar?," he asked. "Thank you, sir. . . . If it isn't indiscreet, may I know what that pertinacious old gentleman said about me?"

"Our chairman?" Dr. Irving extracted a bundle of letters from his pocket and hunted through them. "No, it's not here. . . . He seemed to think you would have accepted his invitation if you hadn't been bound to us. He wanted to know if we couldn't set you free after this term."

"He didn't go into details at all?"

"No. Are you beginning to waver?"

Arthur shook his head:

"It was only idle curiosity, sir. I wondered whether I was to be at Moulton or Stourgrove or where."

The diversion, if it had done nothing else, seemed to have disposed permanently of the indolent Master Petersham, who—like every other boy in "Fussy Finnigan's" house—was "an interesting psychological study", "an exception to ordinary rules" and indeed anything but a bone-idle scapegrace who needed to be waked up violently. Arthur found that his few words with the headmaster had been widely overheard and that he was required to dispel a suspicion of attempted desertion. Cobden, still smarting under the attack on modern studies, enquired with thin facetiousness whether Arthur contemplated "leaving to better" himself by taking service with a duke; and Ramsden, whose pleasantest duty as second master was to control the roster for chapel and call-over, looked up with an affronted "What's this? What's this?" to enquire if his "young friend Camelford" was slipping away without saying a word to any of his colleagues.

It was the tone, Arthur felt, that Ramsden would have used in asking whether a boy from another house had leave to be out of bounds; it was the spirit of a pusillanimous convict who watched his companion escaping and then shouted the alarm. And no adequate reply was possible. Men of another world—Gin-Fizz or Knighton or Carruthers—would doubtless say: "*Why didn't you tell him to go to Hell and mind his own business?*"; but with twelve weeks of Ramsden's society ahead of him Arthur knew that he could not afford to lose his temper.

"The people I've been staying with," he answered patiently, "wanted a tutor for their boys. It's not my

kind of pigeon, but I'm wondering if there's any one I could recommend. Red-headed Ferguson told me last Founders' Day that he wanted a teaching job."

"If you wish your little dukelings to struggle through life under an Aberdeen accent . . .," said Finnigan.

"I think I shall send Ferguson a line," Arthur murmured.

If he allowed himself to be ruffled by all this childishness, he would be known henceforth as "Your Grace", even as Ramsden—who was weak of throat and rang a bell before collecting papers at the end of an examination—was known as "the Muffin-Man", even as flat-footed Cobden was known as "the Cheiropodist".

"Do I understand that you're being given the map-room?," enquired Macklin, of the upper remove. "I was urging that it should be turned into a form-room, oh, years before you came here . . ."

"I was told you wanted to move up six more of your ornaments . . .," Arthur explained.

"Because I'm always given nine-tenths of the scholarship boys to lick into shape! I sometimes wonder what kind of animal the prep-school headmaster *is* nowadays. The cubs he turns out . . ."

"Like *Punch*, the scholarship boy is not what he used to be," whispered Ramsden. "On the evidence of our friend Macklin over the last twenty years, he never was."

Yes, they were in the thick of it again: all but himself, Arthur reflected. And, for some strange reason, every step forward to the new term made Brampton more remote.

As he had half suspected at the time, the stream was definitely less unpleasant than the plunge that took him into it.

Maybe, like old Gin-Fizz, he had been dyspeptic after the good living of Moulton; maybe Dr. Irving's unconvincingly jovial dinner was more than he could bear in the first hours of a new term. His bitter hatred of Brampton and his scorn of his colleagues did not survive twenty-four hours of the headmaster's deliberately exacting routine. By the end of a week, a chastened under fifth was panting at the heels of a master who at least spared himself no more than he spared his form; and an agreeable sense of meritorious fatigue dulled the asperities of life in common-room.

Not, indeed, that the "prospect" of Brampton became any less "distant"—half the time Arthur felt that he was looking on at the activities of a stranger who bore his name and wore his clothes—, but he had ceased to fret over possible lost opportunities when he wrote to enquire the whereabouts of his old pupil Ferguson; and, if he could not at once shake off his "after-the-party" restlessness, he at least recognized that he and not the school, not Gin-Fizz, not even Dr. Irving was responsible for it. The rather humiliating truth was that his head had been turned by what the others called his "success". As the term wore on, he discovered that the impulsive invitations of a convivial house-party did not always mature. There had been no word from Lord Gillingham to confirm his enthusiastic talk of a meeting at Christmas; and the summons to Stourgrove had not arrived when the

time came to arrange for the mid-term *exeat*. If he was disappointed at being forgotten, it was his own fault for imagining that he had given anybody reason to remember him.

Perhaps he would be wiser another time if he made no bones now about his disappointment. How often, in the first weeks of term, he had come back to his rooms with a premonition that he would find a letter awaiting him from Lady Knighton! That shewed the value of premonitions! What delicious tales he had told himself of surprise visits! That shewed the worth of his boast that the Moulton episode was closed!

Not that there was much leisure, under Dr. Irving's time-table, for day-dreaming! Chapel, first hour and breakfast carried Arthur breathless from seven till half-past nine. Then, after punt-about, came second hour, third hour and fourth hour, call-over, hall and—on three days a week—practice-game. Second call-over, lock-up, chapel and tea were followed by preparation, during which the day's work had to be corrected. Dinner in common-room was at eight; and long before eleven most of them were on their way to bed.

"For the fortunate games-master, not even a weekly half-holiday," Arthur grunted, as he put a kettle to boil and began to lay the table for tea.

It was a Saturday afternoon, but he had been refereeing in the match against the Old Bramptonians. He had bathed and changed quickly on the chance of a call from some of the visiting side, but he was secretly praying to be granted a long evening for adding up the marks for the half-term and writing the reports. Three undisturbed hours would suffice, but he was popularly supposed to be at leisure on Saturday evenings; and this meant that from

five till eight he was at the mercy of any youthful malefactor with an imposition to shew up, any less conscientious colleague in search of a fourth for bridge, any captain or secretary of any eleven, eight or pair.

“ ‘ *And at half-past twelve or one* ’,” he hummed,
 “ ‘ *With a pleasure that’s emphatic,*
 ‘ *We retire to our attic*
 ‘ *With the gratifying feeling that our duty has been*
 done. ’ ”

A light knock fell on the door; and he called “ Come in ” without turning round. The kettle was at last beginning to boil! He lifted it off the fire and looked up a trifle impatiently at the opening door. No one came in; but the voice of a woman obviously afraid of bursting into a bedroom asked :

“ Can you tell me if Mr. Camelford lives here? ”

“ Lady Knighton!,” he exclaimed, pulling at the door so violently that she almost fell into the room.

“ It’s Mr. Camelford himself! One of your boys offered to bring me, but I thought I could follow his directions and then, of course, I lost myself. You don’t light your staircases very well.”

“ We so seldom have visitors. This is a most delightful surprise! I was just going to have some tea. If you can face rather stale cake and buttered toast . . . I can vouch for the toast. If I learnt nothing else when I was a boy here, I learnt by most painful experience to make good toast. Taken with anchovy paste . . . ”

Arthur became conscious that he was talking rather feverishly and broke off to shut the door and push an arm-chair to the fire.

THE CAST-IRON DUKE

"You're sure I'm not disturbing you?," Lady Knighton asked, her blue eyes taking in the stacked papers that covered half his table.

"Barring two chapels to-morrow, I'm a free man till first school on Monday. You know, I was thinking of you a moment before you came! I had a letter this afternoon. One of my old pupils is on the look-out for a tutoring job . . ."

Lady Knighton loosened her long fur-coat and laid it over the back of a chair.

"D'you mind if I take my hat off?," she asked. "I get such a headache if I keep it on indoors."

"I wish you would! And then do please tell me what you're doing in Brampton. I in the meantime will get busy with the toast."

As he returned to the fire, Arthur looked down with a twinge of apprehension on the glistening flag-stones that led from the cloisters to the common-room. If Winstanley or Farmer drifted in to ask whether he would play bridge that night, he would never hear the last of this clandestine tea-party with a young woman who made herself at home by curling up in a basket-chair and allowing herself to be fed with buttered toast.

"I was in this neighbourhood," Lady Knighton explained, "and I thought I'd call to see if there was any sign of you. Tell me about this young man who wants the tutoring job."

"He's a double first and would have played for Oxford at soccer if he hadn't slipped a knee-cap. Ferguson his name is."

"And you think he's equal to the work?," Lady Knighton asked. "As you saw for yourself, it's not going to be all plain sailing."

"I'm sure he'll do whatever's required of him. He's a first-rate fellow. Indeed, his only fault is one that he shares with many precocious boys; he's entirely without ambition. But, then, a man of ambition doesn't take up tutoring except as a stop-gap. At the moment he's cramming for the civil service, but I'm sure he'd willingly throw that up."

"He doesn't sound as if he'd be altogether a match for the duke."

"Ah, I'd rather forgotten that he had to fight the duke in the intervals of educating your boys."

Lady Knighton laughed and accepted a slice of toast drenched in butter and glistening darkly with anchovy paste.

"Oughtn't you to say: 'educate the boys in the intervals of fighting the duke'?", she asked. "You must have noticed that that was our major occupation."

"And, I should have thought, a whole-time job for any man," Arthur had to admit.

"Was that why you wouldn't take it on?"

"There were many reasons, but fear of the duke was not one. Like the raw recruit and the inspecting general in the American story, we're equal in one respect. *'He can't rejoice you and you can't rejoice him.'* When you've nothing to lose, you become very brave! Besides, if you established the thing on a proper basis, I don't see quite where he would come in."

For several moments Lady Knighton sat staring silently into the fire.

"And I don't see quite how he can be kept out," she answered at last. "I warned you I should reopen the attack if I were cornered. I want your advice. Things have moved so quickly since the summer. I've reached

the point now when I'm wondering if I can go on any longer."

5

There was an unmistakable quaver in her voice, which deprived Arthur of speech. He had come to regard Lady Knighton as a woman who could never lose control of herself.

On a sudden inspiration he wrote "*Back at 7.0*" on a sheet of notepaper and pinned it on the outside of his door. Then he turned the key and drew the curtains.

"Just to make sure we shan't be interrupted," he explained. "I'm most awfully sorry to hear this, you know."

The moment of weakness passed as suddenly as it had come.

"And yet you can't be very much surprised," she sighed. "You heard the duke planning to get us at Moulton for good. Well, I wouldn't agree to that. When people grow up and marry . . . At the end of the holidays I took the boys back to Stourgrove, which was full of painters and paperhangers! We nearly had a free fight over *that*. The duke insisted that he must have our house for his Birmingham agent. I said he was welcome to it when he or Charlie had found us another. He wouldn't commit himself, but he suggested I might have a look at Leominster House and report on the state it was in. . . . I'm afraid I fell into the trap. I was only two days in London, but during that time Charlie had moved the boys out of Stourgrove and the duke had moved his agent in. Quick work, don't you think? It might seem

a little high-handed to any one who didn't know the duke . . ."

"It's sheer kidnapping!," Arthur exclaimed indignantly.

"And yet Charlie has just as much right to the children as I have. Needless to say, he wouldn't have stirred if the duke hadn't given him his orders: *he* doesn't want to bury himself away from his friends and his amusements. I suppose the systematic early terrorization has left its mark, though . . ."

"But what are you going to do now?"

Lady Knighton frowned slightly, as though she would not be asking other people's advice if she could have told him that.

"I *could* smuggle the boys into a car and drive off," she answered, "but we can't go *on* like that! I want to see how I can make the best of a rather unpromising position. And I felt you were the only person who could help me."

Arthur stood up and rubbed his scorched cheeks with the backs of his hands. Lady Knighton looked altogether too fragile for any battle of giants. In a navy-blue dress with a loose scarlet belt and a deep collar she would have passed for a schoolgirl; and she sat like a schoolgirl with one silk-stockinged leg tucked under her and the other gently swinging a patent-leather shoe. It was hard to remember that she had been married more than a dozen years.

"I'll do anything in the world I can," he promised her.

"What line does Lord Gillingham take?"

"I haven't consulted him. You see, I'm afraid he'd tell me to go for a divorce."

"You'd get custody of the children, if you did."

"At a price! Mr. Camelford, d'you remember saying

that boys should be told to behave as they'd like to see their own children behaving and as their own parents behaved? I warned you that some parents behaved very oddly nowadays! As long as I can, I'm going to hide from Moulton and Eddie that their father has ever fallen below the standard I've set for them."

"Then, if your husband's settling at Moulton to look after things, I suppose you'll have to live there too."

"Yes, I've been beaten over the business of the Castle. That night when I suggested you might take charge of the boys I gave away my case. This is a fair-looking bargain! Charlie takes over the estate-office; and, as a compensation to me, I can do what I please about schools. If I meant all I said, here's my chance. A tutor on the spot! And the boys under the old man's eye all the time! I daresay you think I'm not quite sane about the duke . . ."

Arthur shook his head and told her of the overtures that had been made, behind his back, to Dr. Irving.

"I've seen everything differently," he added, "since you talked about a streak of insanity . . . I can believe anything of him now. However . . . You still feel as strongly about Eton as ever? I was wondering whether you could send the boys there after all and take them abroad in the holidays."

"I should only do that if I failed to find a tutor who would bring them up as I want . . . Your friend Mr. Ferguson *may* be the very man . . .," she added with scant enthusiasm.

Arthur smiled ruefully and shook his head:

"When I suggested him, I didn't know he was to live at Moulton. I'm afraid, with the utmost respect, that the duke is a whole-time job for most men. . . . Is there no

chance of getting your husband to combine with you against the duke? If he's no keener on Moulton than you are . . ."

Lady Knighton looked up at him and then turned to stare at the fire.

"Charlie suggested that himself, before the kidnapping incident," she answered. "Somebody's sure to have told you that we don't get on as well as we might, so I don't mind mentioning it. Well, I was ready to let by-gones be by-gones if he would play fair, but I wasn't going to take him back till some other woman thought fit to whistle. We've not come to an understanding on that yet. So far as I can see, I could divorce him, *or* forgive him, *or* go on as at present, doing neither. Then I should have him *and* the duke against me. And I should be beaten unless somebody like you, whom I could trust, came to my support. That's what I meant when I said I couldn't go on. I don't want extremes in either direction, but this is too much for me alone. . . . Is there any place in Brampton where I can get you to dine with me?," she ended abruptly.

"The only possible hotel is *The Feathers* . . ."

"Ah, that's where I'm staying."

"You're *staying* in Brampton?"

"Yes. At the moment I'm homeless. Obviously I can't go to Moulton till I've arranged the future to my liking. And I didn't mean to leave till I'd found you disengaged. Great presumption, wasn't it? But I was at the end of my tether. Now, does eight o'clock suit you? Good! Then please give me some more toast and let's forget all unpleasant things till we meet again in that most unpleasant hotel. This room is altogether too enchanting for squalid confessions! It reminds me of

THE CAST-IRON DUKE

Cambridge in May Week and my first grown-up parties, when my brothers were at Trinity. On the eve of the war, you know. When the world was still wonderful and life was still sweet and one was young enough to believe in love and things of that kind."

CHAPTER TWO

THE STRONGER SEX

J

Six o'clock had struck before Lady Knighton announced that she must be going; but it was nearly seven before she pulled on her hat and begged Arthur to shew her the quickest way to her hotel.

They would both of them—he suspected—have had some difficulty in reconstructing their conversation, which seemed to have been based on an exchange of autobiography with critical digressions into early marriages, family traditions, celibacy, the Brampton staff and the social amenities of Stourgrove. The same, however, might have been said of their conversations in the summer, when they began with a discussion of the Moulton portraits and ended with a debate on English and American humour. Their inconsequence was half their charm.

Arthur found that he had forgotten how much he delighted in these rambling, easy confessions; or perhaps for the last six weeks he had been trying, with indifferent success, to forget how much he missed the companionship of a young, gay, sympathetic woman. Now, as when he sat beside her on the first night at Moulton, he was conscious of physical and mental well-being that seemed altogether too perfect to last; she was so decorative and at

the same time so intelligent, so easy and so beautifully poised, so quick and yet so modest. They moved from subject to subject, as they linked this conversation to one of six weeks before; and, whenever Arthur saw her looking at her watch, he threw her a new challenge to keep her from moving.

She did not, indeed, require much persuading. With the locking of the door, the drawing of the curtains and the mending of the fire, she seemed to sink deeper and deeper into a drowsy contentment that matched his own. And, when at last she roused, the little lines reappeared between her brows and her manner became nervously alert, as though she were resuming an habitual attitude of defence which for once she had been able to lay aside.

"You should have turned me out *hours* ago!," she reproached him.

"I was enjoying myself too much!" Arthur removed his warning notice from the door and helped her into her coat. "Thank goodness my beloved colleagues left us in peace. About the middle of the term we all come in sight of homicidal mania; then the *exeat* gives us our second wind . . ."

"You're going to Leamington, you said?"

"Unless anything better turns up. As I told you, we're a most devoted family, but we have no hankering after one another's company." One more effort to detain her could do no harm. "If you'd like to see us in bulk . . ."

He lifted down a framed group and watched with a smile as Lady Knighton tried to think of an appropriate comment.

"You're the best-looking," she observed disconcertingly.

"I should have given the prize to Margaret, but the

standard's not a high one. I feel we're the perfect type of the continental caricaturist's idea of the English. Bone and more bone and still more bone! In our noses and teeth and jaws. Great thatches of hair. Of course the men ought to be smoking huge pipes and wearing kilts. . . . Like the true English of all classes, rather angular and repellent . . ."

"I don't agree. Now, I'm going to be just as frank as you are! You all of you have more than your fair share of good looks, which I imagine you get from your mother, but I feel that your brothers and sisters might be just the least little bit uninteresting. I don't imagine they think very much or feel very deeply. Well, the first night we met—I hadn't the least idea who or what you were—I knew I wanted to talk to you . . ."

"And I thought you were just putting the shy stranger at his ease!," Arthur laughed.

Lady Knighton returned the photograph to its place on the top of a book-case and began to examine the worn volumes which he had painfully collected in the last ten years. She seemed unable to tear herself away from these rooms with their reminder of Cambridge in May Week before the war, when she was "still young enough to believe in love and that sort of thing".

"Shy you *certainly* aren't," she answered. "If you like to say 'diffident' . . . You're sheltered here. You don't have to take big decisions or shoulder heavy responsibilities. If you don't care about the men you work with, I suppose it's an encouragement to meditate. You're driven in on yourself. And that's what interested me so much that first night: your bull-dog stubbornness combined with an odd, reflective quality . . . However, I'm only embarrassing you by talking like this. Remember

you began it! And now *please* shew me the way, or I shall never be dressed by eight o'clock."

This time she was evidently in earnest; and Arthur made no more effort to keep her. They would at least be meeting again within an hour, though he could not hope to find her still in the present mood of irresponsibility.

"If you could give me some idea of the advice or help you want . . . ,"

he began, as they set out through the cloisters.

"I've told you the *facts*," Lady Knighton answered. "Do you feel you can help me at all?" They walked for a hundred yards in silence. "Can you think of any reason why you should try?," she then asked; and after another pause: "Can you find any excuse or explanation of my coming to you?"

He had not succeeded in finding an answer when they reached *The Feathers*; and with a laugh and a wave of the hand she disappeared into the dingy, print-hung hall. Arthur returned at a trot to his rooms. A faint smell of rose-water met him; and he threw open his windows and cleared the table before any one could ask who his visitor had been. There would be questions enough next day when three disappointed bridge-players demanded an explanation of his absence; and he would be lucky if he did not find that his movements were known and misunderstood before he was required to account for them. *The Feathers*, he had told Lady Knighton, was the only possible place for dinner in Brampton; but, as he had omitted to tell her, it was also the only place where visiting parents could entertain their sons' bored housemasters.

"Well, it would be selfish to grudge them the opportunity for a good gossip," Arthur reflected, as he began to dress.

His immediate concern was to find a means of paying for the dinner. He was, of course, technically Lady Knighton's guest, but to dine at her expense seemed like being "treated" by a schoolgirl.

The dangers of an unwelcome encounter and of an altercation over the bill were swept aside simultaneously when he found himself being shewn into a private sitting-room with covers for two, a bottle of champagne in an ice-bucket and a sofa-table in the window covered with liqueur-bottles and cigar-boxes.

Lady Knighton was evidently not one of the hostesses who allowed a dinner to collapse if there was no man to arrange it; and she seemed to have an excellent idea of what was due to her. The table-cloth was clean, the fire was bright; and the awed waiter looked as if he had been sent to wash and put on fresh linen before presuming to enter her presence.

"Not much of the schoolgirl here," Arthur decided.

As she came into the room, he felt that she must also have an excellent idea of what was due from her. The sleeveless black dress with the rose in brilliants over one hip, the long string of pearls, the jade ear-rings and the faint, exotic scent were worthy of a brighter setting than this old-fashioned country hotel; but to make less than the best of herself would have hurt this proud young woman's self-respect.

"It's terrible what havoc the weaker sex can cause!," she greeted her guest. "My conscience runs knitting-needles through me whenever I think of all those papers on your table, but necessity grants no law."

"I shall have all to-morrow to dispose of them," Arthur answered. "And if you knew what it meant to escape from the machine for a few hours! It's on *my* conscience that I've never enquired after the boys. If they're now at Moulton, I conclude they must have left their preparatory school?"

Lady Knighton motioned him to a chair and curled herself at the end of a sofa on the opposite side of the fire:

"They were taken away as soon as we decided to have a tutor. That made everything so much easier for the kidnapping! The duke's chaplain is looking after them at present, but he's only a make-shift. . . . Well, I don't suppose you've had much time to think things over since we parted . . ."

As she lighted a cigarette, Arthur studied her face to see how much candour she was likely to accept.

"Enough to make me feel you're leaving one rather important factor out of the equation," he ventured, "Don't you ever think of yourself? An outsider has no business to tell people what they 'owe' to themselves, but I do feel you've a right to *some* little peace and happiness."

The fair head moved slowly in a gesture of dissent:

"You mean, by a general break-up? There'd be no happiness for me if I thought I could possibly have avoided it."

"Then you must either resign yourself to living at the castle . . ."

"If it means handing the boys over to the old man, I simply won't! And that's what *would* happen if I imported any one like your friend Mr. Ferguson. No *ordinary* tutor . . ."

"The alternative," Arthur continued, "is to join forces with your husband."

"I could certainly do that." Her tone suggested that this possibility had not occurred to her; but, as Arthur marked the curling corners of her mouth, he could see that she had spoken in savage irony. "It would end the vicious circle," she went on. "At present, Charlie's unfaithful to me because I won't live with him; and I won't live with him because he's unfaithful to me. Would you, if you were in my place?"

"I'm afraid that's *really* not a question I can answer . . ."

"But it has to be answered! If we made common cause against the old man, I've no doubt we should win, but Charlie would stand out for his own terms. I don't find that a particularly agreeable prospect; but, if I put my own feelings on one side, I know it wouldn't last . . ."

"Are you doing yourself justice?"

"Certainly! Charlie's interest in women is purely physical and comes to an end when he's bored. After all, that's the harem point-of-view his grandfather taught him. He's not yet bored with me because I began to have babies so soon that there wasn't time; and I have all the fascination of something that's been snatched away before he was ready to throw it away. One can't say things like that to poor Lady Rhayader, but it's *not* my 'American coldness', it's *not* my 'feminine vindictiveness' that keeps us apart. If you like to say 'fastidiousness': I don't want to be one of a crowd. I may be forced to it if you're right in saying that's the only alternative to a divorce. I won't admit yet that it is. If *you* would come to my rescue . . ."

"*I?*"

She was clever, Arthur had to admit. He had not

expected that any one would make him responsible for driving her either into her husband's arms or into the divorce-court.

"If you would come, as I asked you in the summer . . ."

"Lady Knighton, it's not possible . . ."

"But you're not tied here. Dr. Irving told the duke, who told Charlie . . . Now, why *shouldn't* you?"

As she looked up, gently persuasive, Arthur felt tempted to retort: "*Why* should *I*?" Her confidence in her own powers of cajolery antagonized him; and it was hardly for her to complain of being trapped by the duke when she had been setting a trap of her own ever since she drifted so innocently into his rooms that afternoon. The old man himself could not have prepared the ground more skilfully! First of all the little girl in the big chair, throwing herself on his protection and seeming to thank him with her tired blue eyes for this hour of asylum. Then the ill-used wife, so icily reserved as a rule, begging him to save her from a husband who would first sully and then discard her. Finally, if he proved more of a glutton than a knight-errant, there was the experienced woman of the world trying to win him with champagne and caviare. She had even gone the length of inviting him for one time and ordering the dinner for another so that he should have no chance of running away before she had finished.

"This is really rather an extraordinary proposal, Lady Knighton . . .," he began.

"I wish you'd call me Moyra," she broke in unexpectedly. "'Lady Knighton' makes me seem even older than I generally feel. We're only about the same age; and that's not so very old."

"I wonder now," Arthur continued, as though he had not heard her interruption, "as I wondered two months ago, whether you grasp in the very least . . ."

"What I'm asking?" She nodded slowly. "I'm asking you to throw up your career, change the whole course of your life and mortgage your future for ten or twelve years, all for the sake of two little boys who are just like any other little boys—to you—and a woman, almost unknown, whom you probably regard as hysterical. Oh, I grasp all that!"

"You're asking me to come between your husband and yourself . . ."

"I grasp all that! Won't you go on?"

"I don't think I've anything more to say."

"Then let me say it for you! I'm asking all this of some one on whom I have no shadow of a claim, some one that I can't possibly repay. There *are* compensations. You can make what arrangements you like, now and when the whole thing's over. If you want to travel . . . But all that's so trifling. Oh, I really do honestly see the full enormity of what I'm doing! Do you on your side grasp in the very least how much I need your help?"

Unable to look her in the eyes, Arthur stared at the fire and kicked petulantly at a projecting log.

"I see, of course, you're in a miserable position . . .," he began.

"And, rightly or wrongly, I feel you're the only person I can rely on. Very foolish, perhaps. Certainly very presumptuous. I shouldn't make this really rather extraordinary proposal, though, if it weren't really rather extraordinarily important to me. I've told you, tearing it out of myself, just how I'm placed. Don't imagine I enjoy stripping in public . . ."

"But I can't understand why you come to *me*," Arthur interrupted uncomfortably.

"Then you're not being very intelligent. Or not very truthful! I wonder which. Well, you shan't be worried any more till you've had something to eat!"

3

Though he awoke at intervals to the discovery that the kitchen staff were excelling themselves, Arthur paid little attention to what he was eating. Unless he displayed his utmost tact, this evening—which had begun so charmingly in his rooms—would end in disappointment, perhaps in bitterness. Though she was trading intolerably on the extravagant deference which she had doubtless learnt, as a girl in America, to expect of all men, Moyra (as he must remember to call her now) was the last person to accept meekly a hint that most of her troubles were imaginary or that all of them arose from the same obstinate wilfulness that she charged against the old duke.

Conversation was made, if not easy, at least easier by the intermittent presence of the waiter; and Arthur kept her from renewing her appeal by reminding her that neither here nor at Moulton had she indicated what curriculum she expected her ideal tutor to follow.

"If you go in for too many out-of-the-way subjects," he warned her, "you won't find any one man to fill the bill."

"It's the spirit of the teaching that I value, far more than the subjects taught," answered Moyra. "I don't suppose I should quarrel much even with the duke about the time-table. Except over religion. I'm anticlerical."

When I see how the churches have killed Christianity, my heart melts to atheism. It nauseates me, too, when he pretends to say anything '*with a pure heart and humble voice*'. However . . . In one form or another it's the *cant* of Moulton that I'm always fighting against."

"Of Moulton? Or of England?," asked Arthur. "If I could only make you *see* . . ."

"If it's common to England, the lesson was taught from Moulton!," she rejoined. "Begin where you like! Money? I was brought up by my father to think it was vulgar to talk about money, but in America I found it was the test of a man's achievement. I don't care which convention you accept—they're *only* conventions—, but Charlie and the duke think it's all right to publish in *Who's Who* the number of acres they own and all wrong for a man to make a fortune in trade even when he says nothing about it. That's one point where we shall never, never, never agree!"

"And Heaven help the poor tutor who tries to make you."

Lady Knighton's shoulders moved in a faint shrug.

"He can at least hint that there are two sides to the question. It's the awful infallibility of Moulton . . . Look at the matter of personal display! In old days a great nobleman was expected to dress the part, but people of our age feel that ostentation is a mark of ill-breeding. There's nothing but cant to distinguish the duke from the King of the Costers, but because he's a duke . . . Won't you have some more caviare? I hope I haven't taken away your appetite!"

"No, but I wish we could have got this over this afternoon!"

"I meant to, but your room was so peaceful and I

did so want a little peace. I *know* I'm asking something preposterous," she continued, as the waiter at last shuffled out of the room, "but I should have thought that very fact . . . If a total stranger knocked me up in the middle of the night to say he *must* have brandy and blankets and a car, I might think it preposterous, but I should feel it was serious."

"Even if he could have got as good brandy and blankets at any other of a hundred houses?"

Moyra sat without speaking while the next course was brought in.

"That's where *we* shall never agree," she then answered. "I felt that first night that if *you* came . . . Some people might have been flattered . . ."

The blue eyes watched him steadily; and Arthur found himself whipping at a grievance which he did not feel in the hope of distracting her attention from a danger which he felt and could not describe.

"They might also think it a tall order to throw up a job they've held for ten or twelve years . . ."

"But *you* don't think that! You'd leave here to-morrow if you could start a school of your own. And, my friend, you know this is not the mere caprice of a spoilt woman! I shouldn't have asked you if I hadn't felt that you understood and would do anything in your power to help me. Wasn't I right?"

"I'd always *rather* say 'yes' . . .," Arthur began uncomfortably.

"A charming quality, but I should like to make it more exclusive! That first night . . . That rather wonderful first night . . ."

The softening in her voice produced a hardening in Arthur's heart. At the end of that "wonderful first

night" he was asking himself whether Lady Knighton would think he had drunk too much at dinner and how they would meet on the morrow of a declaration that she was too attractive for him to live comfortably in the same house. No doubt she had made charitable allowance for a simple-minded schoolmaster struggling in an unfamiliar element, but she must not think that money and rank gave her the right to hail him like a taxi nor that her beauty and pathos gave her the power to ride rough-shod over the plain dictates of common sense. Ever since she invaded his rooms, she had been trying to beguile him with her clothes and her scent and her voice and her laugh. If he did not meet many women in the course of his work, Arthur had met the Delilah type of literature.

"I don't remember saying anything very much that night . . .," he began, frowning.

"The things that are left unsaid are always so much more significant! Even if women haven't eyes in the backs of their heads, they know when they're being watched. At least as you watched me that evening. However, I may be throwing myself bouquets I don't deserve. You may have the same manner with all women . . ."

She broke off as the waiter returned with a whispered enquiry about the wine to be served with their dessert.

"Nothing more for me, I beg," said Arthur. "I shall have to be going quite early . . ."

"Even though you've nothing but two chapels till Monday?"

"You have a most formidable memory!" He waited for the door to shut, wriggling impatiently on his chair.

"No, I must go because I feel I'm here on false pretences.

I don't like to accept your hospitality and then go on saying: '*It can't be done, it can't be done!*' When you told me you wanted my *advice* . . ."

"You wouldn't have come if I'd said I was going to make this attack on you. And I wanted you to come. I wanted you to enjoy yourself. I ordered the best that this place could provide, I supplemented it from Fortnum's, I brought my own flowers, I put on the most alluring dress I had. If I'd set myself, heart and soul, to vamp you . . ."

She stopped to laugh, at her own thoughts; and Arthur flushed when he remembered his own unspoken phrase about "the Delilah type".

"You did more than that," he answered, straining to speak in her own measure. "You made me realize what a miserable life we all lead here. You're the first woman I've ever entertained, that was the first time I've had what any one could call conversation in six long weeks . . ."

"If you came," Moyra interrupted, "you'd be a good deal less solitary than you are here or at home. And so far you've given no reason why you *can't* come. You admit you're not afraid of the duke, you don't mind Charlie, I think you actually like me."

"But it's *not* possible!"

"My dear, how you repeat yourself! May I ask one question? It may sound strange, but I think you gave me the right when you paid me what you called a compliment and then ran away without explaining it. Are you afraid that you might fall in love with me? If so . . ."

She left the sentence unfinished; and Arthur, at the risk of offending her, could not restrain a laugh. In a

cleverly played game this was unquestionably the cleverest move. If he said "No", she would tell him that he had no excuse for refusing her; if he admitted even a dispassionate liking, she would challenge him to prove it. Simple-minded he might be, but no one could be taken in by her ingenuous protest that, if she had deliberately set herself to fascinate him, she could not have taken more trouble.

"I trust I shall never fall in love with any one who's already married," he fenced. "That seems to be asking for trouble."

"You can't always help yourself."

Though the statement was general enough, her tone contained a hint that he could perhaps not help himself now. Arthur accepted the challenge and looked at her frankly. He observed that her lips were parted and that her bosom was rising and falling, but her eyes met his calmly and she passed one hand over her hair as though she were smoothing it before being photographed. Her arms, white and slender, were one of her greatest charms, her hair was another; and she knew it. Perhaps, in the moment that she stood up to ring the bell, she was remembering that her white back must not be forgotten, nor her slim, straight legs, nor her narrow, high-arched feet.

"If that ever *were* my fate," Arthur replied, "I could undertake not to make a nuisance of myself to the unfortunate woman. I don't say it would be easy or comfortable . . ."

"But that's not why you're refusing?," asked Moyra, as she returned to her place. "If it had been, I could have assured you . . ." The sentence ended in a sigh. "I suppose I must take it that this is your last word?"

Arthur was once again spared the necessity of an immediate answer by the return of the waiter; and, while he shambled from door to table, Moyra stared at the *menu* and maintained a semblance of conversation about the food and wine. It was a foible of the duke's, she explained, to travel with his own larder and cellar; and she had copied him to the extent of bringing her own pheasants. Her father, on the other hand, always asserted that, the more remote a country hotel, the better the chance of finding good brown sherry and, perhaps, madeira. It was an almost automatic effort, Arthur felt, to conceal her disappointment, but it was not entirely successful. He would have been sorrier for her if she had not tried to make him responsible for her dilemma. Like all women, presumably, she was trying to get the best of half-a-dozen different worlds; but she had married Knighton of her own free will, she was refusing of her own free will to divorce him. . . .

At the same time, it was not pleasant to think of her being pawed and kissed by a man who smelt of whiskey at ten o'clock in the morning. Until she insisted, he always felt it was bordering on sacrilege to smoke a pipe in her presence; and, though she had passed—maybe of intention—within an inch of him on her way to the bell, he could not imagine himself ever daring to touch her. For one thing, she looked as if her gauzy clothes would rend and herself break if any one laid a hand on her. Amazing how women could dress themselves in air! More amazing still how these frail, transparent creatures without a muscle shewing in all their bodies could spend long days tramping or in the saddle. . . .

Meanwhile the waiter had withdrawn and Moyra was waiting for an answer.

"You'd make my position ever so much easier," said Arthur, "if you'd let me find you some one who wasn't tied as I am. It's really ridiculous to pretend that I and I alone . . . I'm the most completely commonplace human being south of the Trent . . ."

"Are you? I'd never thought about it. The important thing was that I believed in you. When you promised to help me . . ."

"I had every intention of keeping my promise. I still have. It's absurd, though, to pretend . . ."

"I'm not *pretending*. I'm telling you something that I feel. That first night I was suicidally miserable. Charlie making a fool of himself again and the family blaming me. Father was the only person in the world I could lean on; and he wouldn't live for ever. My brother Amberwell is a great dear, but he never approved of my marriage and he always takes the line that I've made my bed and must lie on it."

She looked up with narrowed eyes, as though she suspected Arthur of siding with her brother.

"He would only be one of many to ask why in the world I was helping to keep you and your husband apart. That's what it amounts to, you know."

"I didn't bother about that. I didn't bother about anything except that, whether you liked it or not, we were going to be friends. You were so splendidly sane and healthy in that grave-yard setting, where everybody talks in whispers and defers to the duke. I thought you liked me. And so I've been banking on you all these rather difficult weeks . . . oh, as I bank on seeing the sun rise to-morrow morning . . ."

Stopping abruptly, as though she felt that she was losing control of herself, she reached for her bag and

deliberately extracted a gold cigarette-case. Arthur struck a match and carried it round to her.

"But can't you grasp how difficult, *impossible* things are going to be?," he asked with scant patience.

Moyra took the proffered match, then flung it away and sprang to her feet, putting her hands on his shoulders to make him look at her.

"'Are' going to be? Does that mean you're coming?," she demanded eagerly.

Under her film of black chiffon, Arthur fancied that he could see her heart fluttering, but his own had begun to pound and the sight of her pale, excited face so near him was stupefying. What he had said, what he had meant to say, he did not know. He meant now to extricate himself and tell her that they must think this over calmly, but her eyes were shining with tears and he found that he was holding her to him.

"We . . . we must have a *little* time . . .," he stammered.

She shook her head, shivering, and a tear splashed down her cheek. With his disengaged hand Arthur felt for a handkerchief. Anything to hide the frantic appeal in her great dark eyes! He led her back to her chair. Anything to disguise that the slim body which he was clasping had been offered for his protection! Not that there was any purpose in telling himself lies! He knew that he would not yield it to the demands and rights of an army of husbands.

"I'm sorry to have made such an exhibition of myself," Moyra whispered. "The last few weeks . . . May I have another match?"

Arthur lighted her cigarette and walked to the fire, where he stood with his face turned from her. Until

he had forgotten the tremulous grip of her hands on his shoulders, he did not choose to see her white arms again nor again to breathe the scent of rose-water which she exhaled as she moved.

"Let's both take a day to think it over," he suggested. "You're spending the week-end here? I feel extraordinarily sorry for you, but I know this is going to be a most hideous mistake . . ."

"But it isn't! Charlie and the duke have both agreed to your coming. I don't pretend it's going to be *easy*: you'll have to say '*Hands off*' to the duke at the very beginning . . ."

"Ah, *that's* not what I meant! "

Moyra stared at the glowing end of her cigarette until the lengthening ash turned grey.

"If you really feel it's bound to fail . . . , " she sighed.

"I do. All the same, if you want me and if I can get away, I'll come. . . . And now, for God's sake, let's talk of something else! I've made a complete fool of myself . . ."

What was her phrase about his air of bull-dog stubbornness?

"You've made a very happy woman of me. Does that count for anything? "

"It makes me feel an even completer fool! If only I had the sense to say that your happiness is no affair of mine . . ."

"I'm glad you can't . . . or *don't*! Arthur, why do you imagine I came to you like this? "

"Shall I tell you honestly? "

"Please! "

"Because you wouldn't take the trouble to consult

a scholastic agency! And I . . . The reason I'm coming . . ."

"Don't say anything bitter! You aren't being quite fair to either of us. And I don't think you're being very intelligent. Perhaps it's just as well!"

4

In the hard diplomatic school of Moulton Castle, Moyra had learnt to follow up an advantage promptly; and, before he left *The Feathers*, Arthur was committed to spending his half-term holiday at Moulton.

"You'll know by that time how soon Dr. Irving can spare you?," she asked. "Well, then, we can thresh things out. It goes without saying that you must have a proper contract—I'm proposing to take a big slice out of your life—, but there'll be no difficulty about that so long as you make it quite clear that this is a matter between Charlie and you."

"Shall I find Lord Knighton there?," Arthur enquired.

"Yes. He might pick you up here and motor you home." Her mouth and eyes hardened. "You will also find a Mrs. Leveret. I don't know whether you've met her . . ."

"I've heard the name."

The tiny parallel lines that were Moyra's only confession of fatigue or annoyance shewed for a moment in the smooth whiteness of her forehead.

"Charlie's being so silly about her that I thought it best to have her invited to the Castle. People may talk rather less afterwards. And perhaps, if she sees that I have no intention of resigning my husband to her, she

may give up bothering him. I only hope the duke won't tar-and-feather her."

"Is that a common practice of his?"

"Well, there's a dreadful story of some woman who tried to entangle my father-in-law in the dark ages. They say the duke cropped her hair and turned her out in her night things, just to shew how very unattractive she really was. I can quite believe it. As I've told you before, that old gentleman is *not sane* . . . Well, I'll send a car for you after luncheon on Friday. If you realized how grateful I am . . ."

Arthur shook his head dubiously and stood up to say good-bye. Moyra's immediate troubles might be over, but he had still to face a difficult encounter with Dr. Irving, still to concoct a plausible story for his relations. Should he say that he had been offered something too good for him to refuse? And what terms should he demand of Knighton? If they would give him a house in the neighbourhood, he would avoid the embarrassment of meeting Moyra daily; and perhaps, in all their family ramifications, they could find him a few young nephews and cousins. The companionship would be good for the little Moultons; and from such a seed there might grow the preparatory school of his dreams.

"I can understand why the duke's come round to your side," said Arthur. "He wants to have you all under his eye. It's not so clear why Lord Knighton is willing to give up Eton."

"I don't think he *is* willing. He probably hopes that you, with your public-school sympathies, will convert me. You must be on your guard against that."

"Oh, I'm not going to saw off the branch I'm standing on! Well, it would be ungracious to complain when

you're all uniting to welcome me . . . ,” he added sardonically.

Did Moyra, then, find nothing suspicious in the simultaneous surrender of her husband and the duke? Did it never occur to her, when she was trying to melt or dazzle him, that she might unconsciously be playing their game? It was not difficult to construct a sufficiently convincing dialogue between the two men as they sat arguing, over their wine, the past, present and future of Mrs. Leveret. “*Hark 'ee, Knighton, this has to stop,*” the duke would begin. “*And ye'll stay here till it does. Your own fault . . .*” If a young man could not amuse himself with a woman without making her think he was going to marry her and without setting his wife by the ears, he had better stick to the narrow path of virtue. . . .

To this, no doubt, the harried Knighton would reply that, as his wife would have nothing to do with him, he felt free to divert himself as he pleased: the marriage had been a failure from the beginning.

“*Your own fault for choosing a colonial,*” Arthur could almost hear the old man rejoining with venom. “*They think of themselves first and their children next and their husbands last. Moyra wouldn't be half so troublesome, ye know, if she had any interest outside her precious boys.*”

“*Well, I've long failed to supply it,*” Knighton would retort. “*And she's not the kind to console herself . . .*”

And then, after a digression on the sexlessness of American women, the old man—as likely as not—had discoursed on the empty feminine craving for admiration. Granted that Moyra was too strait-laced for the serious adventure which would make a happy and satisfied woman of her, she might be less rancorous if she were more

appreciated. *"If you got some one like that young schoolmaster who was staying here in the summer, he'd chatter about books and music . . ."*

Had they talked in that strain? And had Knighton decided that, if he could engage his wife with a platonic friendship, she would have less attention to spare for his own diversions? The duke's half of the dialogue was wholly in character; one would have to know his collocutor a bit better before approving his replies.

"I'll try to reach an understanding with your husband on Friday," said Arthur. "You said, before dinner, that it was terrible to see the havoc that the 'weaker' sex could create. I can't think you were seriously applying that epithet to your own . . ."

As he walked moodily back to the cloisters, it seemed a wholesome penance to visit the common-room. Sooner or later he would have to break the news that he was leaving Brampton, doing that which he had told the headmaster and his colleagues a bare six weeks before that he would never do, but at the moment he wanted only to excuse himself for deserting his usual Saturday-night bridge-table. It would be a relief to his pent feelings if they told him, without flattery, what they thought of him and if he then retorted in kind.

"A little blood-letting. I shan't get much chance at Moulton . . ."

An unwonted silence greeted him as he came into the smoke-dimmed card-room; and, before he could commit an indiscretion of speech, the "Muffin-Man" had hurried up to whisper that the headmaster was engaged in one of his week-end fraternizations with the staff and that it would now be Arthur's turn if he required fresh victims at his table.

"I can't afford to play with a partner who doubles three hearts with only two certain tricks in his hand," the little man complained. "In the last game I had ace, queen of diamonds, king guarded in spades, six clubs to the ace . . . Is that the rubber, sir?," he broke off to enquire.

Arthur waited by the door, while the score was added. Play was over for the night; and, as they dispersed to their rooms, he followed the headmaster into the quadrangle.

"That business of the old Duke of Leominster has cropped up again, sir," he observed. "I've been dining with Lady Knighton, his grandson's wife, you know, sir . . ."

"And she's asking you . . . ? Will you walk with us to our house? . . . *Lady Knighton*: she's half-American, is she not?," Dr. Irving asked.

"And wholly Utopian! She's at perpetual loggerheads with the old duke and she thinks that I may counteract his influence. If you say you can spare me, sir, I really feel I shall have to go. That unfortunate young woman is almost distracted. I've tried to shew her that any one else would do as well . . ."

"But she insists on having you? It's very flattering, Camelford! "

A pause followed, while Dr. Irving felt for his latch-key; and Arthur tried to define what his feelings would be if the headmaster told him that he must have longer notice.

"Perhaps we could have a talk about it to-morrow, sir," he suggested. "She'd like my answer this week-end. I'm afraid I'm not in the least flattered. Only bored and aggrieved and depressed. The thing's bound to be a failure."

THE STRONGER SEX

"But you want to be released, none the less?"

"I can't help myself, sir."

"She's an old friend of yours?"

"Very *new*! I feel I'm being a complete fool."

"It certainly sounds a little impulsive," Dr. Irving commented drily. "My advice . . . But you haven't asked me for that."

5

When Arthur came out of hall on the following Friday afternoon, he found a car drawn up under his windows, with his employer-presumptive inside.

A man who boasted that he was not afraid of the old duke had little reason to be afraid of the duke's grandson, but the prospect of a solitary drive with some one whom he disliked and despised would have been distasteful even if these feelings had not been reciprocated. And Arthur had no doubt that they were. He was labelled as Moyra's discovery and friend, presumably as her champion and certainly as her admirer.

"Lucky if I'm not called her tame cat," he reflected.

Knighton could hardly expect him to be sympathetic over the Leveret entanglement; and he could hardly expect Knighton to thank him for coming to Moyra's rescue in a way that constrained them both to go on living under the same hated roof as strangers. Hard indeed was the way of the wrong-doer between Moyra and the old man! The woman who wanted him was kept at a distance; and he was condemned to the society of a woman who apparently wanted no one.

For better or worse, that was the impression that Moyra

had left when Arthur called at *The Feathers* to describe his unenthusiastic interview with the headmaster. She had recovered from her moment of hysteria the night before and was so frigidly businesslike that he did not recognize the *ingénue* who had curled herself in his arm-chair, talking of her childhood, nor the "woman of the world" who had laid herself out to fascinate him with her clothes and scents and wistful eyes and appealing mouth. Her charms, apparently, had served their turn; or maybe she was shewing him that their existing difficulties must not be increased by unprofitable indulgence of sentiment.

Perhaps it was all for the best. This meeting would be yet more embarrassing if Knighton's jealousy were roused or his Moulton sense of proprietorship offended.

Arthur advanced to the car and opened the door.

"Give me just a minute to get rid of my cap and gown . . .," he began.

"There's no hurry!," Knighton assured him, extending a hand. "Anything you want to finish up . . . It's really very good of you to spare us a week-end like this. I mean to say, Moyra's been taking up a good bit of your time already." Arthur ran upstairs and returned with his suitcase and hat. "The fact is," continued his companion, "it's the devil's own job to get any kind of agreement between her and my grandfather. Jump in, won't you? I gather that the business side of the arrangement is being left to me. If you'll give me an idea of your views . . ."

"Wouldn't it be better," asked Arthur, "if you told me what you required of me? I should then know if there was the least chance of my satisfying you. For example, on all modern-side subjects I'm entirely hopeless."

The question seemed to take Knighton by surprise;

and he hastened to explain that he was leaving his wife to arrange the curriculum. He was taken by surprise a second time when Arthur enquired whether he would be wanted in the holidays, a third time when he asked if he was being engaged by the duke and, if not, how much authority the duke would exert over a man who was—at least for a time—living and working under his roof.

“I’m afraid I’ve not gone into details,” Knighton answered with an unreadiness very different from the brisk efficiency which he had displayed in the summer when describing his work in Birmingham. “I mean to say, Moyra got this bee in her bonnet; and my grandfather felt that a public-school and university man would be the best corrective . . .”

Arthur encouraged his companion to talk without interruption. Once a schoolmaster, he reflected, always a schoolmaster; and he could not suppress a malicious enjoyment as Knighton floundered through the lesson which he had neglected to prepare.

“Truth to tell,” he was at last driven to confess, “I think it’s a pity the boys aren’t going to Eton, as I arranged within a week of their birth. I mean to say, a man who’s never been at a public school or a university is inclined to be *odd*, you know.”

“And yet only a small fraction of the entire population goes to either,” Arthur reminded him.

“I’m speaking of the public-school *class*.”

“Yes, there I’m with you. I’ve argued with Lady Knighton on those lines.”

“And I hope you’ll argue with her again. I mean to say, it’s not fair on the boys. . . . However, I have no doubt that when Moulton and Eddie see all their little friends going off to school . . .”

Arthur made no comment until he had filled and lighted a pipe. This was very much what he had expected; but, if Knighton and his grandfather regarded his coming as an experiment that must fail and that must be made—with his help—to fail, it would be better to turn the car round at once.

“I should like to be clear whether this is a temporary or a permanent job. I’m not in a position to run risks with my future, you see,” he explained. “And I should like to know whether I take orders from Lady Knighton or the duke. In the event of differences . . .”

Knighton’s pale face flushed, as though he were minded to say that Moyra had taught her lesson well. He controlled himself, however, and emitted a rueful laugh.

“My grandfather will continue to give orders,” he predicted, “whether he has authority or not. You must decide for yourself whether it’s advisable to carry them out, but I hope for all our sakes that you won’t get the wrong side of him. I mean to say, he’s doing everything he can to make you comfortable. I don’t know whether you went into what we call the oak rooms? He’s making those over to you. Bedroom and sitting-room, you know, and a schoolroom. My old batman Mallet is to look after you. And he’s putting the Sunbeam at your disposal . . .”

“That’s very good of him,” Arthur murmured. This was what Dr. Irving would call the first of the “glittering prospects”. He would be treated generously; as generously, no doubt, as the women of the family, one after another, had been treated when they were persuaded or coerced into making their home at Moulton. “At the same time I want to know how I stand.”

“Perhaps you’d better put that question to my grandfather,” said Knighton with an unconcealed taunt. “I

"I hope Moyra's not been setting you against him," he continued. "She's never quite fair to him, for some reason. I mean to say, he gives freely, he asks for very little in return . . . And in some way the rows always come home to roost on *my* head. I hope to God that I'm going to have a little peace now that this business has been settled in Moyra's way. . . . When we get to Hereford, I suggest we stop at the club for a drink."

"I won't have anything, but I'll come in with you, if you like," said Arthur.

In his last two sentences Knighton seemed to have sketched the essential lines of his own life and character. He was a weak man, ever at the mercy of any one who shewed him a touch of determination; and, whenever he failed to find peace in any other way, he ordered himself a whiskey-and-soda.

"I didn't have any luncheon," he was excusing himself. "Well, truth to tell, I don't know that there's much to discuss, when you come to think of it. Moyra *said* you wanted to have a talk with me."

Arthur nodded:

"I wanted to make your acquaintance. In the summer I saw so very little of you. I wanted to be sure you were keen on my coming. And I wanted to find out, if I could, what you and the duke and Lady Knighton really had in mind when you asked me. I can't come if the whole business is going to break down in a month. I can't come if Lady Knighton's going to pull in one direction and the duke in another . . ."

"Afraid I can't answer for any one but myself," Knighton replied unamiably. "*I'm* doing it for peace and quiet. Well, if anything *does* occur to you . . ."

An uneasy conversation was maintained until the car

reached Hereford, when Knighton jumped out, explaining to the chauffeur that he was going to see if there were any letters for him. Arthur refilled his pipe and told himself that the journey was proving less awkward than he had anticipated. If Knighton had growled: "*I want to find out, if I can, what you had in mind when you accepted this tomfool offer,*" it would not have been easy to frame a satisfactory answer.

CHAPTER THREE

ON APPROVAL

I

THE ritual at Moulton Castle, Arthur discovered, took no account of the seasons and was the same for a small party as for a big. Immediately on arrival he was granted an audience similar to the one in which he had been presented to the duke in September. It was terminated, like the earlier one, by his host's firm statement: "Ye would now like to see your room." And, as he left by one door, the next comer was ushered in by another.

A final glance from the threshold confirmed in detail that the book, the branched candlesticks on either side and the fire on the great stone hearth were exactly as Arthur remembered them; and, if it had been possible to imagine the duke's ever hurrying, he might have hurried to seat himself among his properties when the clang of the bell in the courtyard summoned him to his place on the stage and warned him that the curtain was going up. Artifice had become second nature.

As the guests for the weekly shoot had assembled the day before, the newcomer was, presumably, Mrs. Leveret; but Arthur observed that the arrival of a woman made no change in the ritual. The duchess, it appeared, would not come down to welcome her until she made her state entry, leaning on Lady Rhayader's arm; and it was a

breach of tradition, which all recognized half-guiltily, when Moyra emerged from her tower to ask if Arthur would say a word to the boys before he went to dress.

"They'll be asleep if we leave it till after dinner," she explained, more to the groom of the chambers than to Arthur. "And they're so eager to see you. I'm not sure that I oughtn't to be jealous. Ever since they heard you were coming . . ."

Arthur accompanied her to the scarlet-hung room in which they had sat, companions in disgrace, on the night of their first meeting. He would always see Moyra, if he lived to be a hundred, as he saw her that night with her slim white fingers running through her golden waves of hair and her deep blue eyes looking into and through him. And the last sound he would ever hear was likely to be her voice, oddly diffident, enquiring for his rooms at the back of the school-house. He had made up his mind by then that they were not going to meet again. And now? He was here on approval; and, if they came to terms, he would meet her almost daily for the next ten years of his life.

"Charlie found you all right?," she asked, as they mounted the echoing stone stairs together. "And you've seen the duke?"

"He was in great form," Arthur replied. Rather contrary to expectation, he was glad to find no outward change in the old man. The others, since that far-away night in September, had all become so much more complex as one learnt more of their relationships. He remembered likening himself to a man in an oculist's chair, observing the same object through lenses of increasing strength, and to a playgoer, watching a drama unfolding and a set of characters defining themselves. The Moyra and Lord

Knighton of this second act were vastly different from "the duke's grandson, you know" and his "colonial wife", summarily catalogued by old Gin-Fizz in reading through the programme and cast. "Your husband has left me to discuss all arrangements with you."

"We might tackle the job to-morrow, unless you want to slaughter pheasants. Colonel Steeping and two of Charlie's uncles are here for that purpose. And some others that I haven't seen yet. You'll find a fair amount of society here throughout the shooting season. Moulton! Eddie! Here's Mr. Camelford."

As she impelled the two boys forward to shake hands, Arthur felt that she, like her husband, was determined to shew him the bright side of the life to which she was committing him.

"Have you told these young men of their possible doom?," he asked, as the boys took confident possession of him.

"I didn't call it 'doom'," she answered. "And I encouraged them to think it was a certainty."

"Mummie told us you were coming to teach us," Moulton supplemented eagerly. "It's true, isn't it?"

"We hope it's true," his brother added. "We simply can't stand that old chaplain."

Arthur laughed and invited the boys to tell him what they were reading when he broke in on them. One good thing: their sympathy and liking were already gained. As they talked, he knew that Moyra was watching him; and her eyes softened as she saw them renewing an old friendship. They were attractive creatures, with their mother's fair skin and gleaming hair; they looked as if they had her courage and directness, but—unlike her—they had not yet been forced to use it daily. Perhaps

his time here would not be wholly misspent if at the end he could feel that he had given her back the untroubled gaiety which she had lost when she married Knighton. . . .

From the bottom of the spiral staircase the lusty voice of Gin-Fizz enquired whether he might come to pay his respects when he had changed his shooting-boots. Arthur drew back in haste from the edge of a sentimental abyss. It would not do even to think in this way if he were going to be asked, as man to man, why he imagined he was here! Something more than a romantic phrase would be required to justify what his relations and friends must regard as an act of imbecility: throwing up his career for a whim, meddling in other people's affairs, tying himself to the chariot of a woman who meant too little for such a sacrifice to be deserved or too much for it to be justified.

Looking from the boys to their mother, he tried to picture what they would all be like in ten years' time and what they would think in recalling this night. Would it seem worth while then? To be told by Moyra, when they were both middle-aged, that he had helped her by taking her burden on his own shoulders? Was there any good reason why he should? For all their charm, these children would have meant nothing to him if they had not been her sons. Why—unless he was in love with her—should he put himself out for them or for her? And if he *was* in love with her . . .

"Are you thinking of the doom that lies ahead of *you?*," asked Moyra. "That thunderous frown . . ."

Though her tone was jesting, Arthur wondered for a fraction of a second whether he had been thinking aloud.

"I too refuse to call it 'doom'," he answered. "I was just considering . . . You don't realize how delicate my position is," he continued jocularly. "I'm here 'on

sale or return'. Moulton and Eddie may feel that any change after the chaplain is a change for the better, but I've not discussed the subject with the duke . . ."

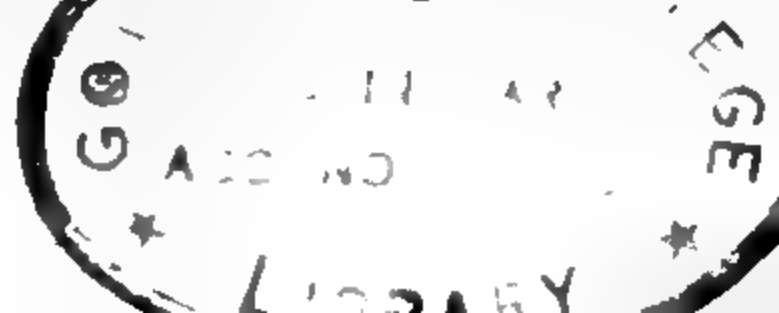
He broke off at the sound of voices on the stairs. Knighton was explaining to some one that this was where his branch of the family lived. A languid voice murmured that it was all too romantic. Then the door was thrown open to admit Mrs. Leveret.

2

As Arthur stood up to be introduced, he glanced at the boys to see if they too noticed the likeness between the newcomer and their mother. Knighton, apparently, was a man who stuck to a single type, at least in externals. Mrs. Leveret, so far as could be judged under a hat and a cascade of furs, seemed to be willowy, fair and blue-eyed; she too favoured the contrast of dark dresses against the milky whiteness of her skin; and the scent which she too used was faintly exotic. The likeness stopped short at the surface, for she had nothing of Moyra's vitality or mettle; and, though it was perhaps not fair to condemn any woman on her voice, Arthur could not associate the vapid drawl which he had just heard with any kind of intelligence. On slight provocation, he imagined, she would develop a lisp; and in suitable company she might descend to baby-language. At first sight, too, Mrs. Leveret seemed—for a reputed adventuress—oddly unsure of herself.

Involuntarily he turned to see how Moyra would carry off the meeting.

"Cynnie's brought some chocolates for the boys," Knighton explained with a vague air of asserting his right to enter his wife's boudoir.



"That's very good of her," said Moyra, stretching out her hands to collect Moulton and Eddie, as though she wanted to make a shield of them. "I hope you're not too cold after your journey?," she enquired with adequate solicitude. "I don't think you know Mr. Arthur Camelford, do you?"

Mrs. Leveret smiled with the engaging shyness of a young girl confronted with a celebrity.

"Only by name," she answered. "You play cricket for Worcestershire, don't you, Mr. Camelford? When my husband was alive, we had a house near Upton-on-Severn . . ." She turned a glance of bright friendliness on the boys. "And how is Moulton? I've heard so much about you both! What great big fellows they are! I had no *idea* . . ." As neither child took kindly to hearing himself discussed by a stranger, she turned swiftly to Moyra. "I'm absolutely *thrilled* by this house. I expect you're bored to death with shewing people over it, Lady Knighton . . ."

"I'll take you round to-morrow, if it would really amuse you," Knighton volunteered. "I mean to say, there's nothing particularly wonderful . . . What about a drink, Moyra? Gin-Fizz will be coming along in a minute . . ."

"Will you ring, then? I daresay Mr. Camelford would like one," Moyra answered. "And, Moulton, you might hand round some cigarettes."

Arthur pulled two more chairs to the fire and returned to his interrupted study of Mrs. Leveret. She was a woman, he imagined, who always did her best to create a good impression and not infrequently failed through excess of zeal; it would have been wiser, for example, not to pretend an interest in first-class cricket than to confuse

Worcestershire with Warwickshire, but no doubt she had misheard Knighton's prompting. At least she had the sense to make friends with the boys instead of trying to dazzle the men; and, when Gin-Fizz arrived, heralding himself with a distant storm of salutations, she was examining the photographs on the top of the piano as though the sorrow of her life was that she had no children of her own.

Arthur submitted to a boisterous assault of hand-shaking and shoulder-slapping, interspersed with questions, and allowed himself to be led into a corner, where he was required to justify his absence from Brampton in the middle of the term.

"Ah, your *exeat*! Of course! I remember asking if you would be spending it with the Knightons," Gin-Fizz whispered with a grin. "By Jove, though, I never expected to see you *here*! Of all the odd parties . . ."

Looking with raised eye-brows from Moyra to Knighton and from Knighton to Mrs. Leveret, he shook his head and accepted a whiskey-and-soda with the air of one who in all he ever cared to know was never deep in anything but wine.

"I'm here on business," Arthur explained, as some answer seemed to be expected of him.

"You're coming here to tutor these boys, I understand, after all. Well . . . And the Knightons, I gather, are a fixture here. So far, so good . . ."

"A lot has happened since last we met," said Arthur, before Gin-Fizz could ventilate his curiosity about Mrs. Leveret. "Knighton's helping to run this place; and his wife doesn't care much about the duke's influence over young people. Such a point was made of the help I might give . . ."

"That you hadn't the heart to refuse. I see! But this doesn't explain what the *other* young woman's doing here."

"Is any explanation necessary? She's a friend of Knighton's. If they refused to ask her here, an old scandal-monger like you would be the first to begin whispering and hinting. When they do, you're disappointed."

Gin-Fizz laughed without resentment.

"That's one way of looking at it," he answered drily. "You don't imagine for a moment that she insisted on coming? No, that wouldn't enter the head of my unsophisticated Camel! Well, *simplicitas* is very *sancta* . . ."

He broke off his whispered conversation as Mrs. Leveret, who had refused anything to drink, asked Moyra the way to her room. Arthur followed them downstairs and waited in a forest of doorways to be shewn his own. The embarrassments of this party were evident enough without being underlined; and he could have borne the malicious thrusts of Gin-Fizz with greater suavity if they had been less well deserved. The attitudes of them all—Moyra, Knighton and himself, the duke and Mrs. Leveret—were ridiculous; and they only made them grotesque by burying their heads in the sand.

"This way!," Moyra called out on her return. "First right, first left, first right and up the stairs . . . I've been trying to remember what we were discussing when Sinless Cynnie arrived."

"I was explaining to your boys that I was only here on approval. Do tell me why you call her that!"

Moyra laughed impatiently as though she regretted having betrayed even this amount of personal animus:

"The first time I ever set eyes on her, we were stand-

ing side by side in the custom-house at Dover. When the examiner presented his list of all the things you have to pay duty on, she smiled sweetly and said 'Nothang, nothang at *all*' without even looking at it. I felt then, I feel now, that at the last judgement she'll smile at the recording angel in just the same way and tell him in just the same tone that she has no sins to confess."

"And, in his place, I should believe her," said Arthur. "She seems too spineless . . ."

"To bear the weight of a bad conscience? My friend, the shrinking, head-achy, ultra-feminine type is the most dangerous of all, because they impel other people to sin! Husbands have to be divorced from time to time, but that's only because they're unfaithful to Cynn timer. She gets new and richer husbands, but that's only because they would rather be divorced themselves than see her lonely and defenceless. She can saunter from one compromising position to another because the whole world knows that she'll never give herself to any one till she's got her pound of flesh, *with* the skin and blood."

"So she *has* nothing to declare. The smuggling's done by some one else."

"Which makes me think God must have a special hell for the people who quite literally keep all his commandments, no less and no more." Startled by her own bitterness, Moyra forced a smile. "I expect I'm being unfair to her; but, if you don't like a person, it's maddening to be constantly mistaken for her."

"I should have thought it was a compliment to your taste," Arthur ventured, "if she copies your clothes."

"How tactful of you not to suggest that I copy hers!," Moyra exclaimed.

"Your style is your own. In some way, hers didn't

seem quite to fit. When people are so consciously refined, I always wonder what they're trying to hide."

Moyra smiled and looked down the passage through which she had just led her guest.

"I suppose she attains her object," she answered with a shrug. "In her you see all that I might be, all that Charlie once thought I was, the chastened and sublimated ideal me! Poor Charlie! As the bee's sting is to the hornet's, so all my stubbornness is to hers. As he'll find out for himself one of these days, if she doesn't give him up as a bad job. . . . Did I behave all right when she came in? I was prepared for everything except the gush over my children. When she advanced, chocolates in hand, I felt that Charlie must have been saying: '*Moyra, with all her faults, is devoted to our boys*' and that she'd decided to be devoted to our boys too. A touching example, don't you think?, of her desire to please. I *suppose* I ought to be flattered . . ."

She stopped as a light appeared among the shadows at the end of the passage. Preceded by a servant carrying a candle, the duke was on his way downstairs. When he came opposite the chest where Moyra was sitting, he paused to draw a watch from his fob-pocket and to say:

"Ye'll be late, my dear, if ye don't go to dress."

Moyra stood up and looked at a clock by the head of the stairs.

"I shall be ready by the time you're out of chapel," she answered.

"Then let me say that ye'll make Mr. Camelford late if ye don't let *him* go and dress. You have all the evening—I hope, many evenings—for conversation . . . It's unnecessary to remind me that ye never take part in our devotions."

3

As he hurried into his clothes and raced downstairs, Arthur found that his interest had strayed from the duke and Knighton and Moyra and was concentrated wholly on Mrs. Leveret. If he lived to be a hundred, he would probably continue to take people at face-value; and "Sinless Cynnie", by this computation, was a superficially seductive, foolish and invertebrate woman with enough power of mimicry to imitate indifferently the speech and manners of a society to which she was not habituated. The undefeated climber described by Gin-Fizz and the ingenuous intriguer suggested by Moyra had for the present to be accepted on trust.

To explain her presence in this party was somewhat less simple than to declare loftily that it needed no explanation, though there was little to choose—on the score of improbability—between Moyra's story that she was being invited to put a stop to gossip and Steeping's hint that she had demanded an invitation. Why, in Heaven's name, should she consent, still more desire, to come where she was quite obviously not wanted? A courtesan fighting for recognition or a mistress plotting to oust a wife had a motive in risking rebuffs; but the technically spotless reputation which Moyra had given her would sit uneasily on the shoulders of a courtesan and Knighton's wife was not a woman to be ousted without a struggle.

As in the summer, the guests were aligned by the door of the chapel; and, when the duchess appeared on Lady Rhayader's arm, Mrs. Leveret was the first to be presented and welcomed. It would be interesting, Arthur felt, to

know what they, above all others, were thinking behind their formal masks of courtesy. Did the old man wish to see with his own eyes what kind of woman was threatening the peace of the family? Was he placing his own incomparable experience of "morganatic marriages" at the service of two foolish young people who did not understand the technique and etiquette of the game? "*A wife to breed from,*" was the old man's maxim, "*and all the frail beauties of the world as a distraction.*" If, however, Moyra was to be believed, Mrs. Leveret did not mean to be any one's "morganatic wife"; if she hoped, as Gin-Fizz maintained, to end her varied career as Duchess of Leominster, she was reckoning without the present duke, who could have no intention of letting his grandson be divorced; and, if she imagined that Knighton would be satisfied with her friendship, she was grievously mistaken in her man.

Meanwhile, in her rather stupid way—now prim, now gushing—Mrs. Leveret seemed to be whole-heartedly bent on pleasing; and Arthur fancied that he saw a glint of approval in the duke's eye as it fell on the prayer-book in her hand. This, no doubt, was another item in Knighton's coaching; but it was difficult to understand why this distracted zealot for "peace and quiet" should be so anxious for her to make a good impression.

"Is she spying out the land?," Arthur asked himself, as they entered the chapel and Mrs. Leveret dropped to her knees for a devout moment. He suspected her of peeping between her fingers, but this was only because he had imbibed Moyra's prejudice. "To see if it's really worth a big effort?"

As the service began, he looked back on the road which he had been travelling since the summer night when he

first stood in this place and tried to sing down the deathly depression which so much old age and approaching death cast over his spirit. Life became less clear-cut and a thousand times more sombre as one learnt rather more about it! In those safe, tranquil days when he had only left his cloister to go—with men of like tastes and circumstances—for a fortnight's winter sport or to take part in the last matches of the cricket season, he had seldom—to his knowledge—associated with husbands and wives who fought for the possession of other men's wives. One read about such people in the novels that found their way into the common-room, one saw them as literary figures on the comedy stage of London; but with the impatience bred of fixed ideas and untried theories Arthur had always imagined that the men would have behaved rather differently if they had been at a decent public school, there would have been less nonsense from these preposterous women if their husbands had taken a firm line with them at the beginning. It really seemed now that the public-school standard was not, by itself, a guide for all human relationships and a solvent of all human difficulties. The Earl of Knighton had been educated at a famous public school.

“As for the women who mess up a man's life . . . ,” Arthur reflected.

He was looking at Mrs. Leveret, but he found that he was thinking of Moyra. She had got him here, against his will, against his better judgement, against his strong and growing conviction that he could do no good; but the futility of her success was a hundred times less galling than the feebleness of his own failure. Never again must he talk of taking “a firm line” with women; no longer could he assume airs of superiority over even such a man

as Knighton. If any one had told him in September that he would collapse before the first woman who troubled to subjugate him, he would have been very contemptuous, but his presence here was his own condemnation.

And no longer, by the way, could Moyra fairly throw stones at Mrs. Leveret on the score of ruthlessness. They were all alike, these women, when they wanted anything. They knew instinctively when they should appeal to pathos and when they should play on a man's susceptibilities: for one, a sop of hope renewed every few days and for another a frank avowal, aimed at his chivalry, that his sacrifice must be its own reward. The moment her end was gained, Moyra had ceased to say: "I thought you were sorry for me, I thought you wanted to help me, I thought you . . . *liked* me . . ."

At the end of the service, the men collected—as before—in whispering twos and threes, while the duke made his primly conversational round with an appropriate question for each. As before, Moyra was the last to appear. As before, she broke the solemn procession into the banqueting-hall by lingering to talk with the latest arrivals. Arthur found himself standing beside Lady Rhayader, who filled the gap before grace by asking whether he had yet visited the oak rooms and explaining that he must let her know if he wanted any changes to be carried out.

"It's so difficult to make the poor duchess hear," she whispered, "and, though I would gladly retire in favour of Moyra, she has lived here so little that the duke has encouraged me to keep the control of things in my own hands. The rooms were refurnished when we had a holiday tutor for Charlie, but that's more than twenty years ago now."

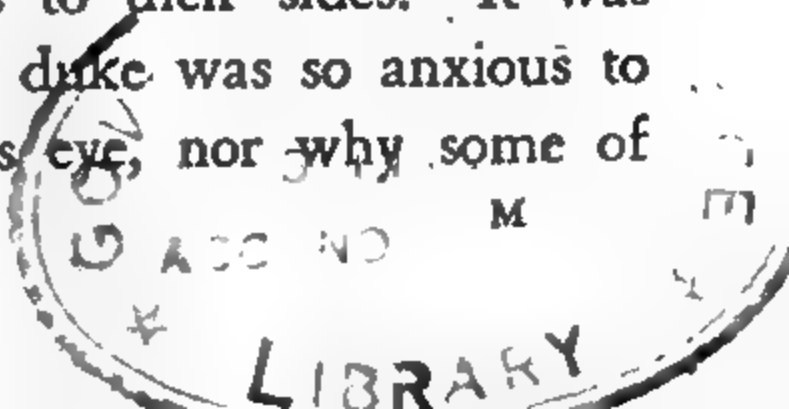
"It's very kind of you," Arthur replied, "but you know nothing's been definitely settled yet."

"Not? I understood there were details to be discussed . . . Oh, I *do* hope you're not going to fail us," she exclaimed with a quaver.

Arthur was startled by her sudden vehemence. They had all made up their minds that he was coming! First Moyra, then her husband, then the duke. When he was introduced to the old man's two younger sons, their first words were an expression of delight that a wearisome and embittering controversy had at last been closed, though they were at pains to add that they did not share their niece's prejudices.

"I've no idea yet," Arthur explained, "what's required of me . . ."

He broke off at the first note of the Latin chant and discovered that the empty place on his other side had been taken by Moyra. Some time, he decided, he must remember to ask whether he would be expected, if he *did* come, to dine each night with the family and, when Knighton was away, to sit alone with the duke, drinking port and bandying quotations from the classics. It was one thing for a week-end guest to attend morning and evening service, to join in the promenade of the battlements and to visit—sugar in hand—the old man's pensioned carriage-horses on Sunday; but a resident tutor needed to have his duties and rights defined. All too easily one would become a submissive shadow at the duke's heels, like Knighton and Lord Henry and Lady Rhayader and Lord William and the duchess, all now standing with their heads bent and their arms to their sides. It was not hard to understand why the duke was so anxious to get and keep them all under his eye, nor why some of



them—perhaps all—resisted so desperately. The old man had gauged the value of background to a pennyweight. Sooner or later they must all give in to him if he could choose the setting in which they met. As likely as not, this explained Mrs. Leveret's invitation. Certainly the double row of subdued Moulton relations provided a formidable object-lesson in the vanity of rebellion and privy conspiracy.

"Rather different from the summer," said Moyra, as they sat down at the middle of a table that was now three-quarters empty. "I'm always urging the duke to use one of the smaller rooms when we're a family party."

"I'm glad to have seen the place with that enormous great fire blazing in the middle of the floor," said Arthur. "Do the boys lunch here?"

"No. And I have all my meals upstairs unless there are visitors. I've arranged, by the way, that you're to please yourself about that. The duke says he'll be delighted, of course, whenever you'll honour him with your company . . ."

It seemed the appropriate moment for Arthur to broach his proposal of a house in the neighbourhood where he could collect an approved class to be taught with Moyra's two boys; but, before he could explain his scheme, she had to warn him that the duke would not entertain it.

"He'll say it's a splendid idea. '*Good, good, good, good, good*'," she mimicked in a whisper. "You'll find, though, that there'll never be a house vacant. That's his way. Having got us here, he won't let us out of his sight, even for half a mile. I don't know what kind of reception he gave you . . ."

"It's been roses, roses all the way," said Arthur.

Moyra smiled to herself and allowed her eyes to rest

for a moment on the demure face of Mrs. Leveret, who was nodding a raptly intelligent punctuation to the duke's discourse.

"They're all suffering from a bad scare over our fair friend," she confided. "Unnecessarily, I think, if they'd only remember that it takes two to make a divorce. The family imagines that, if *only* you can be persuaded to come here, if *only* I can be kept in good-humour, if *only* our fair friend can be shewn that she's wasting her time, Charlie will be a good boy once more and every one will be able to breath again."

"It's very gratifying," Arthur commented, "to find oneself the buttress of this ancient house."

"And what the poor souls don't realize," Moyra continued, "is that, when this little trouble blows over, there'll be another one waiting to take its place. It's a terrible retribution for the old man, but Charlie has proved himself to be almost *too* apt a pupil; and I'm afraid I'm not quite so easy-going as the duchess. I feel it's only right to warn you that this is a sample of what you may expect the whole time."

"Unless . . . , " Arthur began, only to stop with a shrug.

"Unless *I* broke free? I've been thinking of that quite a lot lately. The 'second chance' people talk about nowadays . . . I'm afraid I can't take it. For the boys' sake I mustn't do anything to precipitate a breach. I must even work my hardest to prevent it. I've told Charlie that, if he'll give up his little friend for good, I'll forgive and forget. If he won't even see her for six months . . . But he must choose between us, coolly and deliberately."

With somewhat longer silences and noticeably more feverish efforts at conversation, the dinner followed the same majestic course that Arthur had found overpowering in the summer. At the end he stood up to drink the toasts of "the king" and "the ladies"; and thereafter for an hour he sat between the duke and Lord Henry, crumbling biscuits and trying to get rid of the revolving decanters before his host could pipe up that the bottle was standing or enquire whether he always limited himself to a single, beggarly glass.

The same rejuvenation was observable as the old man warmed to his wine; and it was accompanied by the same coarsening of speech. Arthur found himself wondering whether his own generation was strangely squeamish or whether young men always resented competition in obscenity from their elders. Heaven knew, there was nothing mealy-mouthed about old Gin-Fizz, but even he could be seen raising his eye-brows at the old man's choice of conversation for his middle-aged sons, his young grandson and the prospective tutor of his infant great-grandsons.

"What made 'ee change your mind about coming here?," the duke demanded abruptly of Arthur, as the wine circulated for the last time. "When *I* proposed it in the summer, ye would have none of it."

"In September, sir, I had not had a chance of talking to Dr. Irving," Arthur replied. "And it was too big a step to take without full consideration. We have to look ten years ahead, all of us; and, as Brampton is my livelihood, I have to look beyond that."

ON APPROVAL

"Ye needn't," the old man assured him smoothly. "Leave yourself entirely in my hands . . ."

"That's very good of you, sir . . ."

Arthur waited in the hope of hearing how the duke contemplated providing for him and how long he expected Moyra's crazy experiment to last. As his reference to the next ten years had passed without comment, Knighton must have dropped his grandfather a hint that the man most closely concerned had no thought of obliging them by throwing up his appointment after twelve months. Lord William, less well coached, ventured the hope that his niece would in time abate some of her prejudices, but was sourly adjured by his father to face facts or hold his peace.

"Ye've not thought of taking orders?," the old man continued to Arthur. "I have a number of livings in my gift."

"My inclination would be to start a school of my own. Perhaps without waiting ten years. Indeed, that's one of the things I'm discussing with Lady Knighton," he added, gently withdrawing the subject from the duke's reach.

Again there was no comment. Had a second hint been dropped that the high-and-mighty tutor would take his orders from his employers alone?

"Ye're going to have a talk with her this evening, I understand," said the duke. "Knighton here tells me that, when he saw your excellent headmaster this morning, he consented to release 'ee at the end of this term. I wish 'ee to understand, now and later, that I shall be very much at your service if I can advise or help 'ee in any way. On the business side, I should say that if your solicitor and mine can meet together . . . And now, if ye're sure ye'll have no more wine . . ."

As they made their way to the long gallery, Arthur considered how he should describe this conversation to Moyra. The more he thought over the duke's sudden cordiality, the more he became convinced that he had been allowed only the show of victory. For their own purposes, Knighton and his grandfather would promise anything to clinch the bargain; and, though it was faintly irritating to learn that they had again been to the headmaster, arranging—whether he liked it or not—for a transfer at the end of term, their eagerness could be turned to his own advantage. On the other hand, the duke seemed to take it for granted that he was to be paymaster; and, the sooner he was undeceived, the better. Merely to live under his roof threatened to be difficult enough.

One of the first privileges, Arthur decided, that he would wrest from the prevailing mood of complaisance must be a general exemption from the social life of the castle. The long gallery with its twin fires and its formal grouping of vast gilt chairs had been barely tolerable with a couple of dozen men smoking and playing cards; to read a book with one's feet on one fender while the old man snored with his feet on another and the women of the party sheltered themselves in their rooms seemed no part of a tutor's normal duties. To-night, indeed, Moyra had remained behind in honour of a female guest; but Arthur knew that he could never talk to her in comfort when they were both glancing over their shoulders to see if the duke was listening.

"Can you spare me half an hour some time to discuss the curriculum?," he asked. "If your requirements and my modest attainments happen to coincide . . ."

"You'll consent to come?" Moyra beckoned him to

a chair and waited till Mrs. Leveret had been led out of earshot on a tour of the pictures. "Everything else has been arranged?"

"My solicitor—I don't happen to possess one!—is to discuss terms with the duke's. For what it may be worth," Arthur added, "I could have the pick of the Leominster livings if only I could bring myself to take orders."

"Then you at least no longer feel you're here 'on approval', as you call it? How much pleasanter if we could all feel the same!"

"I don't think you need spare much sympathy for Mrs. Leveret."

"My dear, I want all I can get for myself! It's *we*, I discover, who are on approval at the moment. Ever since she came, Sinless Cynn timer has been making her valuation! I believe she's decided that it will suit her quite well to be Duchess of Leominster and to live at Moulton. Her future stepsons are quite nice boys; the duke only needs humouring for a few years . . ."

"And the fact that the duke's grandson doesn't happen to be in the market . . ."

Moyra swept the objection aside with impatient hand:

"She thinks she can bring him in at her own good time. And she may be right! So long as she keeps Charlie at a discreet distance, she can do what she likes with him. Until he gives up the pursuit in disgust. I was in the same position, so I know! If she holds out too long, as I did, she'll lose him."

Moyra turned her head at the scrape of a moving chair and looked across to the opposite fire-place where the duke had been composing himself for his evening sleep a moment before. He was moving towards the door

through which Mrs. Leveret and his grandson had passed on their way to the museum; and his expression suggested a grimly irascible huntsman in pursuit of an erring hound.

"That, of course, is the worst possible tactics," she observed disinterestedly. "He'll drive them into each other's arms if he tries to keep them apart."

"You take it all very philosophically," Arthur commented.

"Isn't that the only thing to do? I'm interested, psychologically, to see how great a risk Cynn timer will take." Moyra drummed with her finger-tips on the arm of her chair. "I should have thought she was constitutionally timid, but big prizes make big gamblers. If Charlie ran away with her, what then?"

"She'd be done for, if you still refused to divorce him."

"But should I refuse? Our elaborate camouflage would have been washed away by then." Her voice became bitter; and her eyes flashed with the anger of hurt pride. "Every one would know that I'd failed to hold him. And every one would say that I was keeping him tied to me—which is not quite the same thing—out of spite. How spitchful I'm prepared to be is what poor Cynn timer can't decide. . . . If she won't take the risk, she'll have to send Charlie away. And then I suppose he'll come back to me and we shall live happily ever afterwards until the next time."

"And that 'second chance' you were talking about at dinner?"

Moyra narrowed her eyes and stared ahead of her as though she hoped to descry a picture in the glowing caverns of the fire.

"Once our camouflage breaks down," she answered at

last, "there's nothing to keep me tied to him. The court would have to give me custody of the children and I could then live where I pleased and how I pleased."

"I wish to God you'd let him go now!"

"Ah, don't let's talk of that! You can't put your back into a thing if you're telling yourself the whole time that you wish you were free of it. And I feel that I'm essentially the least important piece on the board. If I can carry on till the boys are grown up, they won't need me any more. If I can keep Charlie straight on the surface, I shall have deserved well of the family. One talks of a second chance, but I really don't know that I should have the courage to take it. Or the wish."

"Because you've been let down once, do you imagine there's no such thing as love?"

Moyra looked up in surprise at his sudden change of tone.

"The world's full of it," she answered. "*Too* full. But do I want it? There's a general belief that, if a woman's unhappily married, she'll fling herself into the arms of the first man who's kind to her. That may be true as a rule, but it takes no account of the woman who's so tired out that she's lost all feeling. I'm dead! And I don't even know that I want to be revived."

5

At intervals during the week-end Arthur found himself repeating Moyra's oddly impersonal declaration that, if their "camouflage" broke down, there would be nothing to keep her tied to her husband.

It was of a piece with the insincerities that constituted

the very essence of life at Moulton. The more he studied his neighbours, the more they seemed to be engaged in a vast conspiracy to keep up appearances. The fiction that Lord Rhayader lived an invalid life in consequence of an accident in the hunting-field was solemnly paraded by Lord William Moulton for Mrs. Leveret's benefit. A new fiction—of Knighton's concern for his children—was put into circulation when he ostentatiously forsook the other guns after luncheon and returned home to take his boys riding. And, in the library over his letters, in fragmentary conversation with the superseded chaplain and in heart-to-heart talks with old Gin-Fizz, Arthur noticed that he was developing a pose of his own and keeping up appearances against his family, against his colleagues at Brampton and against his own understanding.

"They think I can really be useful," he wrote to his mother in a letter which revealed his pose in its ultimate perfection. *"Since teaching small boys constitutes my one talent, I must bring it to the best market. If I play my cards properly, I shall be established for life. As both the boys and their parents and grandmother and uncles and great-grandfather all seem to want me, I can look forward to a congenial atmosphere."*

With suitable modifications for his different audiences, Arthur felt that his case was unanswerable; presented with sufficient enthusiasm, it should conceal his own profound sense of misgiving.

To be sure, like the other camouflages in this most artificial of societies, it did not aim at fooling all the people for more than part of the time nor more than part of the people for all the time. That was the first rule of make-believe as played at Moulton Castle, the chief cause of this uncomfortable sense that every one was

intriguing against every one else. No one of that warring household, Arthur reflected sadly, would be taken in by this talk of a "congenial atmosphere"; and Moyra at least was too intelligent to imagine that he was coming here for the sake of an additional hundred or two. That story, however, was good enough for people like Mrs. Leveret, who simpered about his "genius" with boys and asked if he would not be sorry to leave all his old friends at Brampton.

" 'Once our camouflage breaks down . . . , ' " Arthur quoted yet again.

In an age of easy divorce he felt that Moyra was making altogether too much of the disillusionment which her boys would undergo when a corner of the veil was lifted from their father's romantic odyssey. Sooner or later they must find him out; and the business of making perfect, gentle knights became a perilous gamble when the young squires were encouraged to model themselves on a scamp in knight's armour. Moyra was preparing a worse disillusionment if she brought these children up in too rarefied an atmosphere.

" If she'd only grasp the nettle and get the thing over . . . "

Arthur was not deeply impressed by her talk of people who were dead and hardly knew whether they wanted to be brought back to life. She was too young, too courageous, above all too attractive to run away from her fellows because one of them had once disappointed her. Without question she would marry again; and, when she had escaped from Moulton Castle and the duke, she would in all likelihood no longer need her present tutor. All that, however, was in the remote future; and, if she liked to fancy that it held nothing but a vista of grey indifference,

this was only one more pretence for him to accept and repeat.

It was with the sceptical Gin-Fizz, Arthur came to feel, that his protestations carried least weight.

"All fixed up?," he was asked, when they met in the dusk outside the game-larder on his last evening. "By Jove, I was in good form to-day! Couldn't miss 'em! But I suppose you have to teach your young cherubs that it's cruel to kill for sport."

"I'm keeping clear of morals, politics and religion," Arthur replied. "Isn't that a moral question?"

"Ah, don't ask me, Camel! I've *heard* the word, of course, but my worst enemy has never charged me with wanting to leave a good world better than I found it."

"That, unfortunately, is part of my job."

"Then you ought to get on admirably with Lady Knighton. Like to come and talk to me while I change?" He nodded to the head keeper and strode towards the house with his arm linked in Arthur's. "Whether you'll have quite so easy a time with the old duke is another question. His idea of a better world is so much more full-blooded. Speaking frankly, I wouldn't be in your shoes *vis-à-vis* Charlie Knighton and the duke for any money you could offer me."

"Well, as I'm not engaged to teach *them* . . . ,"

Arthur began. "All the same, you think I'm a complete fool to take this on?"

Gin-Fizz delayed to answer until they had reached his room and shut the door securely behind them.

"When you're an old Camel and a wise Camel," he predicted, "you'll have learnt to let people go to the devil in their own way. I don't presume to advise you, but I

will say: 'Rather you than me.' If you *like* fishing in troubled waters, that's your affair entirely."

"But I'm not conscious that I am . . ." Arthur was arrested by a long whistle of incredulity. "I can see, of course, that Knighton's making a fool of himself," he added with the man-of-the-world air which Steeping in some way compelled him to assume and which he felt to be lamentably unconvincing. "Fortunately or unfortunately, he can't come to much harm single-handed; and nobody's doing a great deal to help him."

"You're sure of that? I told you in the summer, Camel, that your modesty would be your undoing. When a charming young woman begs you, on the slightest acquaintance, to come to her rescue in a matter which a hundred other men could handle as well or better, when she pursues you across England on her knees, when you coyly allow yourself to be persuaded . . ."

"It wasn't only Lady Knighton. Her husband, Lady Rhayader, the duke . . ."

"She must have infected them with her rather marked partiality for you. And you naturally shew the good taste to admire her. Delightful! You're in clover! At the same time, as a bachelor and a man of peace, I would rather do my job elsewhere. Interfering between a man and his wife is a dangerous thing at the best of times . . ."

Though Arthur knew by painful experience that opposition was an unfailing stimulus to his friend's malice, the conversation was taking a turn which he could not allow.

"It will be time enough to tell me that, Gin-Fizz, when you see me interfering," he returned.

"My Camel is getting the hump! Your fault, my boy, for asking my opinion of your actions! You suspect

you're doing something very foolish, so you beg me to say you're not. When I refuse . . ."

"But you know perfectly well that Knighton's relations with his wife are no affair of mine."

"I hope you'll see they don't become your affair. Shall I talk seriously for a moment? Well, Cynn timeret makes more trouble for more people in five minutes than any other ten women in a year. Charlie Knighton is in the mood for any kind of folly. And that sort of thing is contagious. Don't become *too* sympathetic! If there's a divorce, your little friend mustn't have a shred of suspicion attaching to her. And remember, in season and out of season, that your present host is probably the most thorough-paced old ruffian in Christendom. That for your general guidance. I don't feel he can be on in this act and yet I know he wouldn't ask you here without a purpose."

PART THREE

CHAPTER ONE

UNDER WHICH FLAG?

I

DURING the first week of the new year, Arthur took up his residence at Moulton Castle. In the trunk that accompanied him, papered with the labels of winter-sport hotels which he felt he had seen for the last time, there lay the silver cigarette-box which the under fifth had presented to him on leaving. In the case that followed by goods train was a calf-bound copy of *A Headmaster's Confessions* from Dr. Irving. In his ears there still rang the comments—half envious and half scornful—of his colleagues when they learnt of his approaching defection. “*You’re doing well for yourself*” alternated confusingly with “*You’ve done for yourself.*” The Brampton chapter was closed.

With a feeling that for the next ten years he would never again be master of his own time, Arthur had spent Christmas dutifully in the bosom of his family at Leamington, where the late revolution in his fortunes hardly aroused interest enough to bridge the first course of their first meal together. “Father” Camelford animadverted on the “priests” (corrected by his mother to “clergymen” and replaced—as Margaret’s compromise—by “incumbents”) in one or two of the duke’s livings; and Horace repeated his hint that an invitation to shoot at

Moulton would be acceptable. Then they were dragged back to the Bishop of Durham's deplorable change of front over disestablishment; and Arthur went to bed with a feeling that his sense of propriety in coming home had been misplaced.

To be sure, there was nothing new in the indifference of his brothers and sisters, but it was thrown into relief by the discovery that one or two other people were faintly more interested in him. His Christmas present from Moyra was inscribed: "*To the best friend I have found, at the time I needed a friend most.*" He had waited nearly four-and-thirty years to meet any one who mattered supremely to him; but this was not a confession which he could make to the family. When he made it to himself, he was constrained to add: "For thirty-three years you've managed to avoid sentimental passions for other men's wives. Isn't it a little foolish to spoil your life for one now?" And yet half the excitement of this new venture came from a suspicion that it was all unjustifiably foolish.

Among his invitations for these few days of holiday was a command, in Lady Rhayader's handwriting, from the duke; but, as Moyra confided by the same post that every inch of the castle would be filled with relations, Arthur decided that he would effect a better entrance when his host was in a less patriarchal mood. Instead, he spent his last week in London, staying with Gin-Fizz and studying the art of good living in the company of a master.

Their tour of the more celebrated restaurants included a visit to Boulestin's, where they saw Knighton and Mrs. Leveret dining within a yard of them. As a meeting could not be avoided, Knighton tried to make the best of it by explaining that he was in London to see certain

fellow-trustees over some unspecified business; and Mrs. Leveret added her testimony that, as a poor, ignorant woman, she never dared buy or sell anything without the approval of her "wise counsellor". The excuse seemed adequate, if unnecessary, and Arthur was chiefly interested to observe that Moyra's terms had apparently not been accepted.

When he went to Herefordshire at the end of the week, the party collected for Christmas had not wholly dispersed; and he was met at the station by Lord Gillingham, who explained that he had waited to get a glimpse of Arthur before setting out for Egypt.

"I wanted to say how grateful I am for Moyra's sake . . .," he mumbled into his beard, as they strolled along the platform. "I took the liberty of hoping you would not mind giving me a lift."

"I'm delighted, sir. And, anyway, it's not my car . . .," Arthur began.

"Well, it's the one the duke has put at your disposal. I'm afraid I'm a bit of a communist about private property among friends, but the duke's a great stickler over vineyards and neighbour's landmarks and so forth. I'm not sure that I ought even to have seen your rooms the other day, but Moyra wanted a male opinion of what she'd been doing there. They're handier than some of the suites," he continued, "because you can come and go by a side door without having the guard turned out in your honour. On the other hand, you're rather remote . . ."

Arthur felt tempted to say that twelve years in two tiny rooms at Brampton and twenty in a country parsonage had eradicated any sybaritic strain. He was to congratulate himself on his silence later, when Lord Gillingham, after the formal audience in the duke's room, led him wide-

eyed through the apartments that henceforth were to be his home. One of the four corner-towers had been made over to him in its entirety, with bedroom, dressing-room, dining-room and study! A vast wood-fire blazed on every hearth, dimming the light of the candles; great bowls of hot-house carnations scented every room.

"If my late colleagues could see this . . .," he commented privately.

A Haroun-al-Raschid in modern dress could not have rewarded a humble Hassan more lavishly! One table was covered with newspapers, another laden with new books. A servant—Arthur's own for the last five minutes—was unpacking his clothes; and, while another submitted a *menu*, the butler entered majestically to enquire what wine he would drink with his dinner.

Before he had recovered from the first shock of so much unaccustomed magnificence, a tap on the door was followed by the arrival of Lady Rhayader, shy and solicitous, to ask if he had everything that he wanted.

"I expect my daughter-in-law will be calling on you soon," she told him, as though he were a newcomer in a country district. "My son has unfortunately been summoned to London, but if there's anything I can do . . ."

"I'm sure there's everything in the world here . . .," Arthur replied in confusion.

"The duke didn't wish to thrust himself on you your first night," she continued. "Indeed, he wants you to feel as independent as my husband and I are, or Moyra and Charlie. We're all so *glad* you've come, Mr. Camel-ford!," she exclaimed impulsively. "Now I mustn't waste any more of your time, but remember! If I can be of *any* help to you in *any* way . . ."

Disjointed, timorous and brimming over with kindness, she trotted out of the room with a bunch of keys swinging from one plump finger and a bundle of memoranda clutched in the other hand, leaving Arthur to decide for himself what difference his coming was expected to make and why they were all so glad to have him there.

"If I can keep those two boys from going the way of their father and grandfather . . .," he murmured and felt his face becoming grim as he remembered his one sight of Lady Rhayader's idiot husband.

Was it softening of the brain? General paralysis? No one would ever tell him! And it did not matter except that he felt a shiver running down his spine whenever he realized that he was now permanently established under the same roof as this pitiful ruined creature whom hardly any one saw or mentioned. Life had not given his poor wife much cause for rejoicing; and it was hard to imagine that she had ever been the young and lovely woman of Herkomer's portrait in the long gallery, envied for the great match that she had made and coming here in triumph, perhaps already bearing under her heart the new life that was to take shape as Charles, sixth Earl of Knighton.

A cowed and beaten woman she seemed, with no edge to her mind; pathetic with her air of perpetually breathless panic and at the same time rather absurd with her jet bugles and silver chatelaine. She was always on the run, always quivering and tinkling. . . .

"There, but for the grace of God, goes Moyra!," whispered Arthur, as the light footsteps died away. A fat and flabby woman, schooled to quiet movement by long training in a sick-room. "Well, it will be something if I can keep *her* from going the same way as her mother-

in-law and the duchess. Bernard Shaw ought to have stayed here a week or two before calling a play *Heartbreak House*."

2

Moyra paid her promised call as he sat in lonely splendour over a glass of immemorial madeira. She, like her father and Lady Rhayader and the duke, apologized for Knighton's absence; unlike them, she did not conceal the nature of his "summons" to London.

"Cynnie cracked her whip," she explained, "so, naturally, poor Charlie had to go. If you bring your wine into the next room, they can clear away without disturbing us. Yes, she's off to the Riviera and Charlie had to see her again at all costs. He advises her about her investments, you know! He ought to be back to-morrow or the next day. If he comes at all, that is."

"If he comes at all?," Arthur repeated.

When Moyra seemed most detached, she was probably—he was beginning to discover—taking things most to heart; and, when she took things to heart, she was not a good enough actress to make her looks bear out her manner. Something in the last two months had set her eyes deeper in their sockets and darkened them to pools of liquid sapphire.

"Well, things haven't been exactly standing still since last you were here," she answered. "Charlie has been more and more in London, coming back here in a worse and worse temper . . ."

"Your offer to forgive and forget . . . ?," Arthur began.

"Not at *all* well received! He was not aware that I

had anything to forgive; and as Cynn timer had made him one of her trustees . . . Poor Charlie! She keeps him at fever-heat by remaining beautifully inaccessible; and after the principal scenes, when he's said good-bye to her for absolutely the last time, the family hit him when he's down by talking about a ' fresh start ' with me. As I don't care about catching him on the recoil from Cynn timer, he has to wait till she's forgiven him. It's sending him off his head, but it's waste of time for me to take him back till he's cured of all taste for her. In her place," Moyra continued with odd detachment, " knowing Charlie as I do, I should say this was the moment for the big gamble. Let them run away together! A scandal becomes a romance when a woman's going to be a duchess . . ."

Arthur finished his wine and stood up to look for cigarettes. At their last meeting Moyra had warned him that the present vagary would end when Knighton was ready to begin another, but it looked as though she had under-estimated Mrs. Leveret's powers.

" And if they can't make up their minds to do that?," he asked.

" I should think Cynn timer would content herself with some one of lower rank and fewer encumbrances. Till then . . . As I've told my poor mother-in-law, it's wanton squandering of a good fatted calf to kill it if nobody's going to eat it; and Charlie only thinks of me as a temporary solace after Cynn timer. However, I didn't come here to weary you with my sordid domestic troubles. We haven't yet discussed what my precious boys are to be taught. And I don't suppose you've seen the school-room yet. Shall we explore it now? "

As she led the way downstairs, Arthur noted for his own future guidance that neither the duke nor Lord Gillingham,

was being invited to assist their deliberations; and from the books and maps with which Moyra had furnished the room set apart for his use he judged that she would not welcome suggestions from any one unless they followed parallel lines to her own. "*Will you please insist,*" he read on a sheet headed Syllabus, "*that, as we spend most of our lives trying to make ourselves understood by our neighbours, our first duty is to think clearly, speak audibly and write legibly? I want you to be a man-eating tiger about um-ing and er-ing . . .*" "*Shouldn't history, at least in the first instance, be taught backwards, starting from what has survived? A live Wesleyan is more to me than a hundred dead Waldensians . . .*" "*There is no conceivable finality in education,*" she had written with an emphasis that seemed to echo some recent altercation with the duke. "*You'd be a fool to teach a boy of the present day how to drive a coach-and-four, but you'd be a criminal not to teach him how to drive a car . . .*"

Though the notes were obviously intended for him to read, Arthur felt—with faint discomfort—that he had inadvertently overheard a private conversation. This was Moyra talking to herself; praying, working and willing for her two boys.

"Nothing is too great or too small for your attention," he observed, turning her boldly written pages. "D'you know, I feel I owe you an apology? There have been times, quite frankly, when I thought you were being—shall I say?—unreasonable . . ."

"And you didn't fail to shew it, Arthur!", she interrupted with a laugh. "The *difficulty* I had to get you here! "

"Most people would say you *were* unreasonable. Until they saw that your sons were a religion with you . . ."

“ And that fanatics are not governed by reason! ”

“ It’s a good thing I’m not vain! If I didn’t know myself to be the fool of the family, I might have been dangerously puffed up by your persistence . . . ” The gibes of Gin-Fizz in the autumn were still vaguely rankling; and, as she stood looking up at him, he remembered with shame the moment when she had laid her hands on his shoulders at *The Feathers*. A vainer man than he now was had fancied she was seeing in him something more than a convenient bear-leader for her boys. “ Unless one realized from the first that it was altruistic . . . ”

“ Is your pride hurt because you thought at one time I was in love with you and you think now I’m not?,” she mocked him. “ That would be foolish. Especially when you’ve told me you could never lose your heart to a married woman. I’m afraid I’ve stuck consistently and unromantically to business . . . ”

Her power of reading his most embarrassing thoughts disconcerted Arthur more than the hint that he might advantageously attend to business now.

“ I don’t imagine you were, are, or ever will be moved by feelings of *that* kind!,” he protested with emphasis that immediately struck him as excessive. “ You told me the last time I was here that you were dead. It would be most awkward for us both if you came to life in that way! Your sons’ tutor! You’ve entirely misunderstood me. I was apologizing in all sincerity for my rather uncharitable feeling . . . ”

He turned at the sound of shuffling footsteps outside the open door. The duke, not content with sending Lady Rhayader, Lord Gillingham and Moyra to make sure that nothing was wanted, had evidently come to see with his own eyes that the new-comer was established in comfort.

"Ye're wasting no time, I observe," he piped with a sardonic smile that made Arthur almost wonder if he had heard their late exchange. "How soon does 'term' begin?"

"I must leave Lady Knighton to decide that, sir. We were just considering a time-table . . ."

The old man shambled round the room, prodding the desks and chairs with his cane as though he hoped to see them collapse in visible proof of his wilful little granddaughter's general incompetence. Pausing before a map of Europe, he observed that "Czecho-Slovakia" was a tom-fool name for a country that every gentleman had been taught to call "Bohemia". The word "syllabus" provoked a noiseless chuckle.

"And I don't suppose ye want any help from me!," he answered. "I came to tell 'ee, Camelford, that hounds are meeting here on Wednesday and there are two or three horses in the stables ye might throw a leg over. My son William has been riding a big brute of a chestnut that ought to be up to your weight. Or there's a bay that Knighton has had out once or twice: a big jumper, but no manners . . ."

3

By the time he went to bed, after another visit from Lady Rhayader to discuss meals and from Lord Gillingham to remind him that the terms of his engagement had not yet been settled, Arthur had recovered from his first excitement and was beginning to feel that it might be possible to have too much even of what he called the "grand style".

UNDER WHICH FLAG?

Exploited by a capable blackmailer, his position could indeed be made to yield whatever he wished. To impose discipline on the two boys, he had only to threaten them with the return of the dreary chaplain; and, if he had hinted that he preferred an open car to a closed, it seemed quite certain that the duke or Lady Rhayader or Lord Gillingham or Moyra would hasten to supply it. At the same time, he knew that all these favours would have to be earned; and there would be an awkward passage when it was discovered that the duke was paying the piper and Moyra calling the tune.

“ ‘ There are two or three horses in the stables . . . ,’ ” he quoted.

Was this the first insidious step in a campaign against Moyra's derided humanitarianism? Was he expected to convince her that the boys would be thought peculiar if they grew up without learning to hunt and shoot? Or did the old man assume as a matter of course that every able-bodied member of his party must be offered a mount? It was hard to say where hospitality ended and calculation began; but from generosity or lust for power the duke followed a uniform procedure with relations and dependents, collecting them round him, swamping them with indulgence and gently strangling the power and the wish to fend for themselves. According to Moyra, her middle-aged father-in-law and uncles were still kept on allowances. No one compelled them to spend a single night at the castle; but, if they elected for independence, they must pay for it. So with the chaplain, the secretary and the family doctor, who was eating his heart out in idleness because he could not now afford to give up the old man's retaining fee.

At one time or another they had, no doubt, all of them

been assured that they need not concern themselves with the future and that they had only to leave themselves entirely in the duke's hands.

"No doubt, too," Arthur reflected, "he's saying now that the best way of attacking a hungry pedagogue is through his stomach." The sideboard of his little dining-room was set with sandwiches, beer, whiskey and cigars. The panelled walls seemed still to be echoing the oft-repeated injunction that, if he wanted anything of any kind, he had but to ring. "It only needs a livery coat and a suit of dittos to make the thing complete! '*Separate room and good outings. On motor-bus route . . .*'"

He filled a tumbler with soda-water and lighted a pipe of his own tobacco. Never should a difficult position be made more difficult by the feeling that he had grown used to luxury and would sell his independence for it.

"Though 'independence' is a pretty fairly dam' silly word," he snorted. "So long as Moyra and I are in the same house . . ."

The only one who had not yet used it was the duke; and, when Arthur met him next day exercising himself between the lifeless beds of the frost-bound rose-garden, he wondered what meaning it held for an old gentleman who still regarded the American war of independence as a colonial insurrection. By daylight, walking with bent knees and tapping his way cautiously over the rime-covered flag-stones, the duke was a homely figure by contrast with the high-heeled, begartered exquisite in the brass-buttoned coat and knee-breeches. A black cloak and a low-crowned black hat with a wide brim gave him the appearance of an old French *abbé*. Despite his waxen fragility he contrived in some way to look immovable, as though he never forgot that the power of binding and loosing

lay in his hands; and Arthur reflected with something like awe that for nearly twice his own life-time the duke had, in his own small kingdom, exercised an authority that most kings and many priests might envy. Small wonder if he at least did not say: "*If there's anything you want, you have only to ring for it.*" Small wonder if he expected his authority to survive his own death. Small wonder if he had rapped out: "*You will take what I think good for you.*"

This meeting, Arthur judged, was not accidental: the old autocrat was indeed waiting to give his orders.

"Good day to 'ee, Camelford!," he called out. "Refreshing yourself before your labours, eh? Quite right, quite right, quite right! My little granddaughter tells me ye had a prodigious debate last night. I'm sorry Knighton wasn't present."

"We fortunately didn't have anything very controversial to discuss, sir," said Arthur. "So I hope he'll approve of what we've arranged when he *does* come."

"And when that will be . . .," the duke muttered, stopping to dig viciously with his stick at the frozen earth. "He's making a fool of himself over that Leveret woman," he continued. "Holding himself at her beck and call whenever she's too lazy to understand what any paid man of affairs could tell her . . . What he *sees* in her I can't make out."

"She's good-looking," Arthur ventured.

"Moyra's features and colouring without a trace of her distinction. Moyra at least has breeding and shews it. I'm coming to think you youngsters are *soft* about women. Ye let 'em play old Harry with 'ee. If ye'd put 'em over your knee occasionally, ye'd soon spank the nonsense out of 'em."

THE CAST-IRON DUKE

Arthur tried to imagine what the duchess and her morganatic sisters had been like at Mrs. Leveret's age. Was it necessary in those more sensible days to whip the devil out of them? Traditionally, the leading characteristic of female Victorians had always been their meekness.

"Mrs. Leveret told me," he answered, "that she'd been left responsible for certain rather large interests which she didn't at all understand . . ."

"She tells every one that," the duke interrupted sourly, "but not every one feels obliged to believe her. No, no, no, no, no! She's a young woman—like any other—at a loose end. She's got on Knighton's soft side . . ."

"If he's at all in love with her," said Arthur, "it makes the spanking cure rather difficult."

"A man's nothing but a fool," the duke retorted, "if he's so much in love that he allows any woman to get the better of him. Amuse yourself while ye're young . . . But that's just what ye *don't* do nowadays! Ye talk and quarrel and make it up and quarrel again till flesh and blood can stand no more. A man will always get the worst of that game. If Knighton would go off with another woman for a few weeks, he'd be able to meet that Leveret trollop on equal terms. '*I'm cool now,*' he could tell her. '*We can talk business,*' he could say. '*If ye want a man to keep 'ee, here I am; but, though ye call yourself my mistress, I'm the master.*' That's sense, ain't it? "

Arthur shrugged his shoulders and left the question unanswered. He was faintly amused to observe that Knighton's wife played no part in the scheme which the duke was advancing for his fevered grandson's salvation.

"We arranged for term to begin to-morrow," he announced. "The curriculum at present is almost

identical with what the boys would have found if they'd gone to Eton . . ."

"But nothing would induce my little granddaughter to let them follow it in the company of other boys," the duke interrupted. "Ye'll have your work cut out, Camelford, to keep 'em from becoming the prettiest pair of young mollycoddles . . . And all for what? The pleasure of getting her own way against everybody! When I suggested Eton, nothing would content her but having them educated at home. When I gave in and asked 'ee to come here, she'd changed her mind completely. If there were rime or reason for it all . . ."

As in the summer, Arthur found himself obliged to defend simultaneously an institution to which he had given the whole of his working life and the attitude of a woman who was uncompromisingly opposed to it:

"She thinks the moral atmosphere of a big school is unhealthy. I've tried without success to convince her that adolescence is an unhealthy phase."

The old man stopped in his slow pacing and struck the flagged walk with his stick.

"And, if ye're either of you right, it's the fault of the masters," he declared doggedly. "Keeping too tight a hand. When I was a lad, there was none of this 'unhealthiness' ye talk about. We were free to come and go. There was a young woman I used to visit in Windsor when I had the mind . . . No good struggling against human nature. That's what I'd like 'ee to get into my poor misguided granddaughter's head."

"Fortunately for me," said Arthur, "I'm engaged to teach the boys and not their mother."

"But that doesn't mean that ye're to swallow whatever folly she may dictate!"

A sudden asperity in the duke's already petulant voice warned Arthur that the struggle which Moyra had told him to expect was being forced on him.

"I suppose I can resign if I think it is folly," he answered deliberately. "As long as I'm here, though, and in receipt of a salary from her, I must try to earn it by carrying out her orders to the best of my ability."

He could feel his heart quickening its beat as he waited for the duke's reply. The old gentleman did not mince his words when he was upholding the cardinal decencies of life; and this, like the question of a husband's behaviours to his wife and his mistress, was one of them. Should the education of two young boys be settled by men—who had been boys themselves and knew all about schools—or should a pig-headed young woman with a bundle of fads be allowed to make a "little Lord Fauntleroy" of the future Duke of Leominster? Sooner or later this must be threshed out between them. . . .

Apparently it was to be later.

"Ye talk as though I were trying to come between you and her," the old man complained in a startling tone of injured innocence. "I am *not* . . ."

He paused long enough for Arthur to whisper "*Liar!*" to himself. "*You wouldn't say you weren't interfering if you didn't know jolly well that you were!*"

"I didn't mean that for a moment, sir," he declared aloud, adding under his breath: "*Liar yourself.*"

"I was thinking," the old man continued smoothly, "of our talk that first night, when ye said how odd it would be for a boy in Moulton's position to be brought up as a sort of freak . . . I'm the first to admit there are things ye get at home that no school provides. I'm not trying to flatter 'ee when I say there's no one I'd

sooner put in charge of the boys during their holidays. Whether they go to school or not, though, our first business is to see that Moyra doesn't make oddities of them."

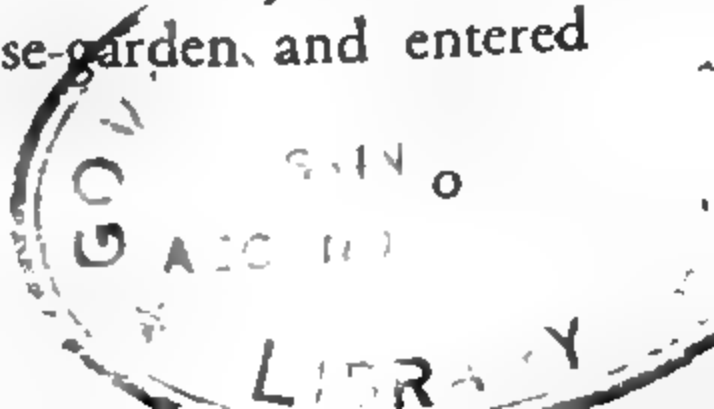
They had reached the end of the rose-garden; and the duke turned towards the castle with a friendly smile that might have been intended to thank Arthur for his company or to express his own feeling that enough good seed had been sown for the first day. Eight or nine months must pass before Moulton was ready for a public school; and Eddie would not follow him for another two years. There would therefore be plenty of work for a tutor; and the duke would achieve his double object of keeping the family at call and of seeing the boys brought up as normal members of their class. Unless he recorded some kind of protest, Arthur foresaw that he would be cited later as a witness against Moyra.

"I don't think you'll find anything revolutionary in Lady Knighton's ideas, sir," he predicted. "They're unconventional, but they're well considered."

"There's enough unconventionality abroad already, without teaching it in the nursery. I say again, our first business . . ."

"I think that's really a matter for you and Lady Knighton, sir," Arthur interrupted. "I feel, with great respect, that *my* first and last business is to do as I'm told. By *her*."

The duke's face lost its smile; and he bowed stiffly, as though to shew that he now knew where he stood. His overtures had been rejected; and these self-willed young people must learn their lesson in a different way. Without a word, he shuffled out of the rose-garden and entered the house.



Henceforward, Arthur recognized sadly, it was to be war between them. He tried to tell himself that this clash was bound to come, but he had not expected it so soon and he dreaded the issue. In some way, he knew, the duke would not fight fairly.

Continuing his walk by himself, he was met by Moyra with the news that her husband had motored down from London and would be at Arthur's service, if there were anything to discuss, after tea.

"Cynnie left for Paris this morning," she added. "And he did *not* see her off. I'm afraid you won't find him in the best of moods."

"Nor you the duke," Arthur returned glumly. "I think I've made clear that I take my orders from you, but he didn't seem to like it."

"No more did Charlie when I made my position clear to him. There's something in the Moulton blood which encourages them all to think they can get the best of both worlds, but you really can't be the prodigal son and his virtuous brother simultaneously."

They walked for some moments without speaking. One of his least pleasant duties, Arthur decided, was likely to be that of hearing Moyra and her grandfather relieving their feelings at Knighton's expense.

"Does that mean that it's all over with Mrs. Leveret?," he asked.

"Only till he finds out whether it's all over with me. She's sent him to ask whether I think it's the faintest use our going on as we are . . ."

UNDER WHICH FLAG?

"And I hope to heaven . . .," Arthur began.

"I've made him thoroughly angry by saying it isn't a thing for me to decide," said Moyra. "When you think as much of your family as the Moultons do, it's only fair that every one should have a hearing. If I ended things by myself, I should have to shoulder all the blame."

As they turned back into the garden, Arthur found that his elation overnight had been succeeded by a sense of hopelessness which tempted him to throw up his appointment before he was committed more deeply. This was his first day as what Moyra and he had agreed to call "the buttress of an ancient house". Already he was at loggerheads with the duke; already Knighton was issuing an ultimatum. And so it would continue until some one goaded some one else to desperation.

"And the advice was not well received?," he enquired.

"Oh, the whole thing was like a stupid game," Moyra answered impatiently. "We both know all the opening moves so well! Was I or was I not prepared to make the fresh start I'd talked about in the summer? Yes, if he was prepared to make an honest fresh start. Oh, he supposed this was a dig at Cynnie. Well, I might or might not believe him, but his relations with Cynnie were entirely innocent. . . . As though I didn't know that! Either they've had an unholy row, or else she's pledged him to find out what I mean to do. Which it is I can't tell you—perhaps both!—, but he kept on about the fresh start till I told him it must include a home of our own. I said, too, that he must undertake not to see Cynnie again: that business has really got beyond a joke. Where we stand now I can't say! Charlie doesn't like being dictated to."

As they paced the flagged paths of the great rose-garden

that ran the length of the castle, a light sprang up in the room that Arthur called the duke's "audience chamber"; and he saw silhouetted against the blind an excited, gesticulatory figure. Was Knighton telling his grandfather that Moyra would not come back to him until they had left Moulton? Or that he did not want her to come back? Or that he had done his best and could do no more? And was the duke demonstrating from his own exhaustive experience how it was possible to keep a wife without losing a mistress? Echoes of the old man's discourse on physical appetite and fevered blood were still resounding in Arthur's head: "*Though ye call yourself my mistress, I'm the master*"; and his feelings of futility deepened as he realized that Moyra was steeling herself to a reconciliation. For all the good he had done, he might have remained at Brampton!

"May I ask how things have been left?," he enquired.

"I honestly don't know," she replied. "Charlie says the duke will insist on his staying here . . ."

"If you started again, do you suppose the thing would last?"

"I should do my best to make a success of it. If he's really said good-bye to Cynn timer, it oughtn't to be so very difficult. She's the only woman who's ever had any real power over him."

"And if she returns to the charge?"

Moyra walked for some minutes in silence, then shrugged her shoulders:

"I should have to go for a divorce in that case." She glanced quickly over her shoulder as though she suspected the duke of following at her heels. "The family would move earth and heaven to stop it, but anything is better than a lingering succession of scandals. I suppose I

could take the boys abroad till things had blown over. And if I explained very delicately . . . Oh, I've made it perfectly plain to Charlie that the present state of things can't go on."

"Then you've told him at last the one thing he wants to know," said Arthur. "I'm glad! It was the only solution."

"I had to shew him that I was in earnest. What the next step will be . . . Well, I must go in and let you finish your walk in peace."

The lamp in the audience-chamber was still throwing an agitated shadow on the blind; but Arthur could not even guess what the distracted Knighton could have nerved himself to say. Obviously, on the eve of term, he was not venturing to suggest that they should all migrate to London, though the duke might well be hinting that the new tutor was unlikely to have a long engagement unless he changed his tune. Obviously he was not whimpering about Moyra's unreasonableness, though his grandfather might well have asked under which flag he proposed to sail henceforth. Obviously he was not accepting his wife's proposal that he should discuss with his own family whether it was worth while to attempt a reconciliation.

"Well, it's no business of mine, anyway," Arthur told himself.

And yet he could not resist the conviction that the entire position had changed since he arrived, four-and-twenty hours earlier, in an atmosphere of welcome and pampering. Knighton was now, for the first time, aware that, if he ran away, Moyra would not try to restrain him. Was he exploring to see what power the duke possessed to stop him? The title and the estates must in time descend to him; and Mrs. Leveret had money enough to

keep them both from starving. It was difficult to see what the old man could do but fulminate ineffectively.

"Unless he sends anonymous letters to the King's Proctor, declaring there's been collusion . . ."

That evening after tea Arthur made his way to the Knightons' tower. There was nothing more for him to discuss with any one, but he had been invited to air his views; and, if they were all enquiring who would be on whose side in a crisis, it would have been a mistake at this stage to proclaim too often that he recognized no authority but Moyra's. As he climbed the spiral staircase, Lord Gillingham came down with the two boys at his heels.

"Hullo! I was just going to initiate these two in the art of billiard-fives," he explained. "Why don't you join us if you're not busy?"

"Well, I promised to have a talk with your son-in-law," Arthur answered.

Unseen by the boys, Lord Gillingham shook his head in warning.

"He and Moyra have rather a lot of things to settle," he replied. "You see, he's going back to London this evening."

"Then I certainly won't waste his time. This is rather sudden, isn't it?," Arthur could not help asking.

"He says he has a lot of things to see to," Lord Gillingham answered vaguely.

There was nothing more, evidently, to be expected from that quarter; and Arthur silently joined the procession to the billiard-room. The first day . . . What, in Heaven's name, did these two small boys make of it all? And what did they think of the harassed, elusive father who was always arriving and leaving in a hurry, always look-

ing over the tops of their heads instead of in their eyes, always slinking from his grandfather to his wife and from his wife to his mother, like an ill-used dog? If they were fond of him, it was only the fondness of habit: their first nurse had taught them to say "*God bless dear father and mother . . .*" Sooner or later they would find him out; and then, probably, they would despise him.

Was there a chance that they would ever see him with eyes of understanding as the victim of his own breeding and training? He had his grandfather's vices without his grandfather's superb assurance in carrying them off. And Moyra had married him because he could not look after himself, she had abandoned him because she could not look after him, they held together for the sake of appearances and no one who watched them for five minutes was deceived. Would these children ever see their father as a figure of tragedy?

And Arthur realized with dismay that he could look forward to three months of this, three times a year!

A footman came in to light the lamps and strip the table of its holland cover. While the boys set out the balls, Lord Gillingham scribbled two addresses on the back of an envelope and handed it to Arthur.

"If you can make time to send me a line occasionally," he murmured, "it would be a great kindness. Just to say how you're all getting on, you know. Moyra's a shockingly bad correspondent; and, when she *does* write, she never says anything."

"I'll do my best, sir," Arthur promised.

"I'm sure you know the kind of thing that would interest me. And, as you're entirely in Moyra's confidence, I shall be able to feel that the voice is the voice of Camel-ford, but the words are the words of Moyra. I'm not

altogether happy in mind. This place doesn't suit her. I wish I could stay with her, but February in England invariably spells bronchitis for me. I may count on you? "

" To the best of my ability, sir."

This, Arthur presumed, was all that the most reserved of men could bring himself to say as a hint that they were neither of them deceived by any of the prevailing games of make-believe.

" I shall be at call for a week or two," Lord Gillingham continued, pointing to his London address. " And, until I'm actually on my way to Egypt, I can always get back at a moment's notice. The trouble is that Moyra, who thinks of everybody but herself, would never dream of sending for me. That's the reason I have to make this little conspiracy with you against my own daughter! "

5

When Arthur returned to his rooms after sending the boys upstairs for their supper, he found the butler waiting, as before, to enquire what wine he would like to drink. It was not suggested that he should dine with the family; and, until the duke had recovered from their passage earlier in the day, it seemed wise to avoid all possibility of a rebuff.

" Evidently I'm not to be refused all supplies," he decided, with a cast back to Moyra's warning that the old man could make life ingeniously uncomfortable for any one who opposed him. " He may, of course, feel that it's sufficient discomfort if I have to take all my meals alone. There he wouldn't be far wrong."

UNDER WHICH FLAG?

While he waited for dinner, Arthur began a letter home to report his safe arrival. Unless he kept in contact with Leamington and Brampton, the size of this place and the isolation of his own corner in it would very quickly get on his nerves! When he came to describe his quarters, he made a mental note that he must ask Lady Rhayader whether he might occasionally invite a friend to use his spare room; and, though it was full early to think of half-term holidays, he decided to arrange a week-end with Gin-Fizz in London. In all his life—Arthur discovered, looking back from Brampton to the army and from the army to Oxford—he had never been alone before; but, with no mess and no common-room to throw him against his fellows, he might well spend a week here without saying a word to any one but his servant Mallet and the two boys. The family had their own occupations; and they were eager to respect his independence. The chaplain only emerged for his services. And no one ever came casually to the castle.

“It’s like being in a gigantic hotel where you don’t know anybody and can’t speak the language . . . ,” Arthur muttered. “The deathly *silence* of the place . . .”

A scrape of footsteps on the stone stairs sent him hurrying to the door. Even a visit from the duke would be better than nothing; and he could hardly suppress a cheer when Moyra put her head in to say that she was on her way to dinner.

“I didn’t know whether I should see you downstairs,” she told him. “Like a wise man, you’re avoiding our dreadful family banquets! I came to offer you Charlie’s apologies for rushing away without seeing you.”

“I hoped you were going to say that you were returning later to help me finish the duke’s really excellent madeira.”

"I should love to, but I don't think it would be well received. Father and the uncles are still here: and that constitutes a party. You must have noticed that this is a very temple of routine! When there's a party and the men retire to their wine, we're supposed to engage in blameless conversation in the long gallery. If I played truant . . . You saw how the duke followed me last night!"

"I didn't understand that he was following you."

Moyra smiled a little wearily and lowered her voice:

"Then, the sooner you understand it, the better! It's a mania with him that every one should do certain things in certain places at certain times. We're fairly safe at the moment, because he's in the chapel, but he won't fail to know I've been here. I imagine the servants are told to report, but there's not much that he doesn't see with his own eyes and nothing infuriates him so much as any breach in his routine. It's an unceasing grievance that I won't go inside that cold, spiritless chapel of his; but as I don't worship his god in his way . . . He'll be fairly annoyed when he finds that Charlie has slipped away!"

"Without saying good-bye?"

"I'm afraid so. They'd been wrangling half the afternoon; and, when he managed to escape, the very thought of going back for another dose made him 'come over all queer', as my maid says. You're keeping an eye on the time?"

Arthur shewed her his watch:

"If you leave when you hear the hymn . . . I don't want to ask indiscreet questions . . ."

"And, my dear, I couldn't answer them if you did! Charlie just told me he was going back to finish off some

work. I know he and the duke are busy on a great scheme for avoiding death-duties. What they've been talking about, why he slipped away when the old man was dressing for dinner I can't tell you."

"I imagine he's taking the boat-train for Paris to-morrow."

"You think so? He'll be foolish if he does anything irrevocable . . ."

"But you've said you'll set him free, if you have to."

"Not if I'm to be left here in the meantime. Charlie hasn't said a word about that. Altogether I don't feel I understand him to-day. He may really have wanted, for a moment, to come back. . . . He may have thought he could teach Cynnie a lesson and go back to her when she was in a humbler frame of mind. I can somehow hear the old man telling him that, if he'll only make things right on the surface here, he can do what he likes elsewhere. They've been on their knees to me this evening . . ."

"The duke?"

"No, my mother-in-law and Charlie. I can't help thinking Cynnie must have turned nasty . . ."

"And I hope you shewed that the remedy was in their hands. I'm beginning to understand why you want to get away from here . . ."

Through the empty passages and silent staircases floated the opening chords of a hymn. Moyra started to the door, then turned to hold out her hand.

"But *you* mustn't let it get on your nerves," she exclaimed. "I didn't mean to worry you, but it really *has* been rather a trying day. To-morrow you'll have some work to occupy your mind and you can forget all about me. Don't feel neglected, by the way, if I don't look you up very much. It would never do for my

mother-in-law to think I was being unkind to Charlie because I preferred your society to his. I'm sure you see that? "

" It would only begin to matter if it were true," Arthur replied.

CHAPTER TWO

"THE UNNATURAL LIFE OF A CELIBATE"

I

"History: very fair. He is interested and takes pains, but I want to see him relying less on his memory and more on his understanding."

Arthur interrupted himself in the task of writing his first half-term's reports and made a note that he must obtain a better series of maps.

"This applies with even greater force," he continued, "to his geography. He can tell me all about the course of a river, but his imagination does not help him to see that its existence—and the difficulty of fording it—may be the reason why a certain town was built in a certain place or why a certain battle was fought at one season of the year rather than another. I hope to make him think for himself more if I can get hold of a contour atlas or—better still—a plaster cast in high relief. Perhaps, too, if he took a motor tour one holidays and saw the physical facts underlying such familiar names as 'the Pennine Chain' and 'the Fens', he would see in a flash what at present he has to take on trust: that is, the geographical factor in history . . ."

When he compared the jejune reports which he had written at Brampton—"Improving" or "V. poor. Is not trying"—with the elaborate critique which he was prepar-

ing for Moyra, Arthur was constrained to ask himself whether he had scamped his work in the past or was taking it all too solemnly now. Both Moulton and Eddie were charming little boys, but they were still little boys. It was too early yet to tell whether they were in any way above the average. And Moyra had said that she did not want them to be above the average if this necessitated forcing. She had not even said that she required an elaborate screed twice a term; and to a cynic it might have seemed that Arthur was making an opportunity of writing to her. Gin-Fizz, for example, would call it—meaningly—“a labour of love”.

Laying his pen aside, Arthur sat with the reports between thumb and first finger, ready to rip them in two. Since the eventful morrow of his arrival, he had spoken once to Moyra, when she came to say that Eddie had a cold, twice with the duke, when they met accidentally on the battlements, and once with Lady Rhayader, when she asked permission to send the house-carpenter into his rooms. It might be that the family was in league to respect his “independence”, it might be that he was himself too fearful of forcing his presence on the family, or it might be that he was being taught his place. In fact, he had not been asked in six long weeks to dine in the great banqueting-hall; and he had not approached Moyra’s tower since her hint that the duke would be unnecessarily irritated if he thought they were withdrawing from the stately ceremonial of the castle to gossip in corners.

“If they don’t want me,” he assured himself, “I certainly don’t want them, but this kind of solitary confinement cramps one’s style as a correspondent.”

Laying the reports on one side, he took up a letter which he had begun a fortnight earlier when Lord

Gillingham wrote to say that, for reasons unspecified, he was delaying his departure to Egypt. A later note added that his prediction of bronchitis had been fulfilled and that he was expiating in bed his foolhardiness in braving an English February; had Arthur any news to comfort his convalescence?

Some reply was required, but all news at the moment seemed negative. Thus, the duke had *not* interfered as Moyra expected; Knighton had *not* decided whether he could live either with or without her. . . .

So complete had his isolation become that Arthur did not know whether Knighton had ever returned to the castle since his headlong flight a month and a half before. They had met once; but that was in London, at a weekend. As the encounter was too inconclusive to be reported even to Moyra, there was nothing to tell Moyra's father; and the episode remained as one more baffling move in an unintelligible game. The facts, to be sure, were simple enough. As Arthur walked along Piccadilly, he had met Mrs. Leveret coming out of the Ritz. She had explained that she was unexpectedly in England on business and had invited him to dine. For two hours they had tried to pump each other with equal assiduity and equal want of success. Then Knighton had arrived; and his ingenuous surprise did not wholly dispel a suspicion that this meeting had been arranged.

"If they imagined I could tell them what's going on in Moyra's head, they must feel they've wasted a perfectly good dinner," he decided. "And, if Moyra thinks I know what stage they've reached, I'm afraid she'll be disappointed."

Were it possible to summarize the dinner in a phrase, Arthur would have called it an orgy of false solicitude.

Mrs. Leveret was so sorry for the darling duke in that he and Lady Knighton hit things off so badly, but she was sorry also for Lady Knighton, who seemed for some reason an embittered woman, and for the two delightful boys, who were a pawn in the game between the old man and his granddaughter, if indeed they were not a human sacrifice to her wilfulness. Knighton, when he arrived, was sorry for any one introduced into a house where everybody was at daggers drawn with his neighbour. "I mean to say, you never know whether my grandfather will go off the deep end over something or whether Moyra will walk out of the house. I mean to say . . . Truth to tell . . . I mean . . ." In his turn, Arthur was sorry that he knew so little of what was happening at Moulton, but he saw no one except the boys and was not in the duke's confidence nor Lady Knighton's. Everything, he had been able to add truthfully, seemed quite peaceful.

"*I have not written before,*" he told Lord Gillingham, "*as I had really nothing to say. And I am in no better case now . . .*"

Everybody, he reflected, seemed really to be testing everybody else's power of endurance; and any one with a taste for betting could amuse himself by wagering whether Mrs. Leveret or the duke or Knighton or Moyra would be the first to give in.

"I might include myself," Arthur reflected, forcing his attention back on his letter. "If I'd known that from Saturday afternoon till Monday morning I shouldn't exchange a word with any one but Mallet and the butler . . . Thank God or the duke, I have the car and can get away for week-ends. *Otherwise . . .*"

In the early days of his gilded captivity he had tried

to become friends with the moth-eaten chaplain, later with Dr. Swinburne, but the effort reminded him of unsuccessful attempts in childhood to make his mother's housemaids bowl to him on the rectory lawn. They had always had their work to do, they knew their place and they would get into trouble with "the reverend" if they were not very careful. Even so, Mr. Trapp and the doctor melted guiltily away if the duke caught sight of them trespassing in any one else's department. They seemed to wait everlastingly for a dictatorial voice to ask: "*What are ye whispering about there?*"; and the repressed air which every one at the castle wore singly and in company made a newcomer feel that he was being excluded from a master-secret of which everybody else knew one chapter. No doubt Bluebeard's household fretted and shivered in a similar atmosphere of mystification; and perhaps Bluebeard felt a spasm of terror when he came upon a mumbling group in some corner. Not, indeed, that any one had a chance here of asking questions or at least of getting answers! How often in the first week Arthur had been met with the reply: "I'm afraid I couldn't say, sir" when he innocently enquired whether Lady Rhayader was in her room or whether Lord Knighton was expected for the week-end! To divide and rule seemed the accepted policy of Moulton Castle.

By example, if not in words, the old man might well have given his docile household a hint of the attitude to be assumed towards the newcomer. A young man who was so quick to repel advances and to proclaim himself Moyra's paid servant could be left to exhaust the delights of his own society. If he wearied of the whole ridiculous "experiment", only Moyra would repine. Were this

the duke's object, he was, indeed, doomed to disappointment. There were abundant books in the house and a man could get used to anything, though Arthur would not deny that there had been times when he would thankfully have abandoned all this isolated magnificence for an evening in the Brampton common-room and a quarrelsome rubber with Ramsden and Hazlitt, even with Finnigan who brought his wretched science to the bridge-table and justified an unjustifiable call by a private "theory of averages".

"No good thinking of *that*, though . . ."

2

Filling a pipe, Arthur returned once more to his letter.

"Now that I am established here, I should like to think that the duke has accepted the fait accompli; but I have hardly exchanged a word with him since the first day or two, when I'm afraid I rather rubbed him up the wrong way . . ."

The paper fluttered in a sudden gust of wind; and he looked round to find Moyra, in a hat and long fur-coat, standing in the open doorway.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," she began a little breathlessly. "I came to ask if you'd take my place with the boys for the next evening or two. I'm going to London. I want to catch my father before he goes abroad . . ."

Arthur cleared a chair for her on the opposite side of the fire.

"I shall be delighted," he answered. "If you'll say what you want done . . ."

"Well, I usually sit with them when they're doing their home-work. And will you see that they go to bed on the first stroke of nine? You won't have any trouble with *them*," she explained, "but the duke might think it a good opportunity for pulling them up by the roots to see how they were growing. No doubt it's very desirable that they should be able to carry their liquor like gentlemen, but they're a little young to begin learning. I haven't told him I'm going, by the way, but he'll find out. He finds out everything . . ."

"I was writing to your father at that moment," said Arthur. "He wanted to know how I was getting on. . . . There's nothing wrong, I hope?"

Moyra shook her head and picked up one of the half-term's reports.

"Is this for me?," she asked. "'*Arithmetic: weak. When he can be made to regard it as a necessary evil . . .*' I trust that's not the Pryor blood coming out! I still have to count on my fingers . . . No, father's all right, thank God. It's Charlie. I want father's advice."

Arthur turned away to put a new log on the fire. If Knighton had in fact not been near the castle for six weeks, it was perhaps the fear of being questioned about his lengthening absence that had caused the family to hold aloof!

"I'm afraid I'm very little use to you," he answered, as Moyra continued to stare at the reports with eyes that were obviously not seeing them. "I wish I could do more . . ."

It was tempting to add: "*But you're so busy keeping me at arm's length!*"

"Thanks! I think it's only a question of making up

one's mind," said Moyra with her customary refusal to be tragic. "This morning I had a long letter from Charlie—so beautifully written and worded that I knew it must be a fair copy!—, telling me that he was not coming back."

"Not . . . ?"

Moyra nodded:

"Our marriage had been a failure, he was sorry for the unhappiness he'd caused me. And so on and so forth. You were quite right, you see, when you said I'd told him the one thing he wanted to know. There was a note, in his usual scrawl, with a few additions for family consumption. Putting all the blame on me, of course. Well, I felt this was too important for me to decide by myself . . ."

"But . . . he's decided for you!"

Moyra narrowed her eyes and nodded grimly:

"It looks like it. But he's bluffed so often. D'you suppose Cynn timer has made up her mind to take the plunge? If they openly set up house together, I shall be doing more harm than good by keeping Charlie tied to me . . ."

"Even the family must admit that."

"I should think so. By the way, you mustn't mention these two letters to any one! Glad as the duke might be to see the last of me, he couldn't bear it if I took the boys with me. If it's merely a bluff, I'm not to be tricked into helping in a scandal that might be avoided."

As she sat with her lips compressed into a thin line, Arthur wondered what advice or help her father or any one else could give her. There was a type of woman, beloved of psychological novelists, who enjoyed indecision and the interest which it aroused in good-natured counsellors, otherwise indifferent; but Moyra did not seem

to get even the perverse pleasure of biting on an aching conscience. She would cling to her chains till they rusted through.

"If you do nothing," he suggested, "I suppose they'll have to shew that they mean business. It's not the advice I want your father to give you! I should like him to say: '*This is too much of a good thing . . .*'"

There was no purpose now in finishing his letter; and Arthur relieved his feelings by tearing it into small pieces. The sound caused Moyra to look up with the disarming patience which he found so admirable and so exasperating.

"But you neither of you see that I daren't make Charlie desperate," she answered. "Until the court has definitely said '*Hands off!*', he can cause all kinds of trouble over the boys. And still less can I afford to make the duke desperate. As I should, if he got wind of this. It's really not so simple as you might think. If I had only myself to consider . . ."

The distant throb of an engine was borne through the west windows; and Arthur looked down, without answering, on the court-yard and main gate of the castle. A car was waiting, presumably to take Moyra to the station. It was conceivable that she would not come back and that he would receive a telegram bidding him pack up and bring the boys to London. No doubt she had looked as far ahead as she was able, but he could not help wondering what her feelings would be when the doors now opening were forever shut against her, when the present duke and Lord Rhayader were in their graves and another woman ruled here in the place that should have been hers.

"You wouldn't mind giving up all this?," he asked.

"It hasn't brought me so very much happiness! I don't ask anything more of life nowadays than a little

peace. No, I should actively *hate* the place if it weren't going to be Moulton's one day. . . . However . . ."

She was gone like a flash of light, as though she feared to lose command of herself; and, as Arthur made his way to the boys' room, he heard the car driving away. A pleasant mission for her, he told himself, however it ended! And a lot of use *he* was being! . . . As the boys sat with their fair heads bent over their work, he amused himself by covering a sheet of paper with the symbols of a chess-problem. "Queen to move—already moving, you may say—and mate in one move. No, that won't do at all! Queen gives check . . . No! She'll be taken herself unless she moves and gives check at the same time . . . If she takes Knighton at his word and chucks his letter at the duke's head . . ."

It was impossible to go on. In this discordant, uncertain house the one thing certain was that nobody could ever predict how the old man would act; nine-tenths of his power came from the suspense which he so carefully cultivated. Like a cat with a mouse between its paws, he might strike at any moment . . . or not at all.

Strolling to the fire, Arthur consigned his chess-problem to the flames and tried to imagine what he would himself do in the old man's place and with the old man's cast of mind. It was idle to bribe; and it was impossible to bully, when his victim was out of reach. To withhold supplies would only avail if Knighton and Moyra were both entirely dependent on his munificence.

"There's nothing he *can* do . . . And yet he's not going to take this lying down." Arthur returned to his chair and listened as the clock in the courtyard chimed the hour. By now Moyra must be in the London train. "A

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pleasant mission,” he told himself again, “however it ends.
And a cheerful place to come back to!”

Seizing a sheet of notepaper, he wrote impulsively:

“This is to greet you on your return. There are many things I’ve been wanting to tell you; and perhaps I can say by letter what I should never dare say by word of mouth . . .”

3

The two days that Moyra expected to be away lengthened to four; and the boys were beginning to ask how soon their mother was returning, when she walked—unannounced—into the schoolroom at the beginning of evening preparation.

“I’ve come to thank you,” she told Arthur briefly.
“Shall I take charge?”

Evidently she wanted to get rid of him; and he studied her face for any indication of what had happened in London. If Knighton were coming back, she could have mentioned it to the boys; if he had left her finally, her manner would in some way surely have betrayed her. And yet her expression added nothing to her few, business-like words.

Arthur collected his books and went to his sitting-room. On the table he found a letter; and the opening words shewed him that she had said nothing definite because she knew nothing definite.

“For all the good I’ve done, I might have spared myself two cold and tiring journeys. I spent three days trying to get in touch with Charlie, only to be told on the fourth that he had gone abroad. My father left London this

morning; and, as I've promised not to do anything without consulting him, it looks as if I should have to keep Charlie waiting till April or May.

"I vowed the other night that never again would I inflict my troubles on you, but your letter has so warmed my heart that I'm afraid it has melted my resolution! You complained of being 'useless', but does it never occur to you that in a somewhat cold world your devotion—so patient, so wonderful, so utterly undeserved—is the greatest comfort any one could receive? I can never repay it. Indeed, I've deliberately kept away from you ever since you've been here, through a feeling of inadequacy. If I said anything, I should either say too little—which would be worse than nothing—or too much, which would be fatal. And really I've been too tired and distracted to do more than keep up appearances before the boys and the servants.

"Now, despite my fruitless journey, I don't feel tired or distracted any more. I at least know what has happened: Charlie wouldn't make such a mystery of his address, if he'd gone abroad by himself, and I can't hope to do any good by holding out against him. I've failed, though I've done my best, and I suppose I ought to be overwhelmed. Instead of that, I feel free, for the first time since I married; free and hungry to enjoy everything that's been denied me all these years. The heartbreaking uncertainty and disappointment are over.

"For the present, I must warn you again, not a word must be said about Charlie's latest move. Were the duke to hear of it . . ."

Arthur slipped the letter under a book and snatched up his pipe and pouch as a knock fell on the door. Before he could call "Come in", it had opened; and the duke

“THE UNNATURAL LIFE OF A CELIBATE” himself, only recognizable by his upstanding shock of white hair, was peering into the shadowy room.

“Ye here, Camelford?,” he asked, panting from the exertion of climbing the long spiral staircase.

“Yes, sir! Let me give you a light.” Arthur sprang up and shut the door, then took a taper to the line of candles that surrounded the walls on three sides. “Won’t you sit down, sir?”

“Thank ’ee . . . Well, ye’ve been in hiding for the last few weeks. I looked in to see there was nothing amiss. Are ye all right?”

“Never better, thank you, sir. The truth is, you’ve made me so comfortable here that it’s an effort ever to go outside. And at Brampton there was so little time for reading . . .”

“So long as ye’re not lonely . . . ,” the duke muttered.

Arthur lighted the last of the candles and prepared to draw the curtains. Standing with his back to the room he could see the old man’s reflection in the glass of the window; and he watched for any expression that would reveal the purpose of this most unexpected visit. None came. The duke was sitting with his hands clasped over the knob of his long cane, staring into the fire with watery blue eyes and threatening at any moment to fall asleep. He seemed to have aged in the last month; and Arthur wondered whether he too had come to unfold a tale of defeat.

“I’m never lonely, sir, when I have a book that interests me,” he replied, without confessing how few books had succeeded in capturing his interest during the last six weeks. “With the marvellous library you have here . . .”

“And I daresay ye like a quiet evening when ye’ve been working all day. Quite right, quite right, quite

right! At the same time, be pleased to remember that ye're welcome, *most* welcome, whenever ye're in the mood to dine with us. I don't press 'ee, because the house is fortunately big enough for every one to do as he likes . . ."

"It's very kind of you, sir." Arthur stood amazed at the self-deception of which the old man shewed himself capable in suggesting that any one was ever at liberty in this house to do anything but what had been laid down by its head! "To be quite frank, I've been rather afraid of being in the way . . ."

"In-the-way fiddlesticks!," the duke retorted. "Come to-night! Moyra will be there. To be quite frank with *you*, it's my birthday. Nay, nay! Don't congratulate me! It's no cleverness of mine. By God's mercy . . . And none of that 'many-happy' rigmarole! I don't know that I want to live many more years in this wonderful, enlightened world. Labour and sorrow, ain't it, that the psalmist calls a man's life when he's passed four-score years? Ye'll come, then? Excellent! And now perhaps ye'll be good enough to give me a light down these stairs."

Arthur picked up a reading-lamp and led the way to the door of the duke's apartments. As they traversed room after room and passage after passage, he could not help wondering why the old man had not written a note or sent a message. So well was it advertised in advance that Mr. Camelford would dine with the family that, when he got back to his bedroom, Arthur found a long coat and white waistcoat already laid out for him; and the only possible explanation of the duke's visit was provided by a small box containing a set of studs and a note: "*At my age it is more seemly to give presents than to receive them.*"

Was this a belated apology for that old brush in the

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rose-garden? Had the declaration of war been forgotten? Or was it possible that the old man's reputation for inflexibility rested on bluster? With the calm defiance of Moyra, even with the spasmodic rebelliousness of Knighton, when his passions were roused, there was in fact nothing to be done; and it really seemed as if the duke had the good sense, however tardy, to recognize it.

What a different place, Arthur reflected as he began to dress, Moulton Castle would have been if a few more people had stood up to him in the last sixty years!

“Thank God, I've not been cursed with this insane passion for having my own way in everything,” he muttered. “It is insanity. And, if you admit that, you can't help being sorry for the old boy . . .”

He felt sorrier still as he went downstairs and engaged once more in the ceremonial procession to the chapel and thence to the banqueting-hall. The duke seemed so frail and tired. All this pomp was so wasted in an almost empty house. And, when one analysed the achievement and purpose of the old man's long life, one could only say that he had blighted the existence of every one whose destiny touched his in a perverse endeavour to preserve a dead tradition.

Now, when he seemed to be unbending, it was almost certainly too late.

4

In honour of the birthday, a general amnesty seemed to have been proclaimed, extending even to the “little granddaughter” who was presented on arrival with a pair of diamond ear-rings. “Quite right, quite right, quite right!” rattled like hailstones on an iron roof when Moyra

told the duke that she had returned that evening from London after seeing her father off to France, that she had not met her husband and that he was indeed reported to have gone abroad.

"I expect it's that house in Paris again," grunted the old man. "He'll be sorry if he *does* sell it, but I know it's the fashion nowadays to live like bagmen in these horrible hotels. Well, well, well, well, well . . . When I was Knighton's age, ye had your own house—if ye could afford it—wherever ye expected to be. Truth to tell, Paris never appealed strongly to me after they set up that vile republic, but there the place *was*. Ye'll miss it, Moyra. When Knighton takes 'ee to buy frocks . . ."

A sidelong glance from under the bushy white eyebrows darted down the table in search of a tell-tale frown that might shew whether Moyra was likely to travel again with her elusive husband.

"It's terribly expensive for the little use any one ever makes of it," was her only comment. "If you count up the houses we never enter from one year's end to another! Paris, Newmarket, London, Rome. And none of them ever let!"

"Because I don't choose to have strangers squatting on my property like a pack of gypsies. I understand that's another fashion of the times, but at least I'm not obliged to follow it. . . . Well, well, well! Will ye give me the pleasure of taking wine with 'ee, Camelford?"

Arthur drew himself erect, raised his glass and bowed. The diversion gave him an opportunity of looking at Moyra, whose eye he had hitherto been careful to avoid as she talked to the duke about the house in Paris. A feeling of immense liberation had come to him, at the beginning of that week, as he wrote to her; but, until he

read the opening words of her reply, he had more than half expected to be told that such protestations were unwelcome. Where was the boast so haughtily uttered at Brampton that, if he were foolish enough to fall in love with another man's wife, he would at least not make a nuisance of himself to her? Very strange, this irrational itch to give oneself away! What good was done by declaring: "*I want you to know that I adore you?*" To judge by her letter—or as much of it as he had read—, Moyra was "comforted"; and very strange, in women, was this itch to be worshipped and wanted. Now, though, that they had both unbosomed themselves, it was unlikely that their relationship would become any easier. A day might dawn when Arthur would have to say: "*It was bad enough when you never came near me, but it's a thousand times worse now that you do.*"

Liberation? Though he had hardly seen her for six weeks, Arthur discovered that he had been obsessed by her image; and, now that they were together, he felt that every one must be noticing his obsession. Her voice and laugh thrilled him. He was beginning to flush and stammer when her big eyes turned on him. Her bare arms and shoulders, now almost touching him, made his pulses throb. It was idle to remind himself that he was her paid servant, a penniless schoolmaster, and that she would have been beyond his reach even if they had met before she had a husband and children. If Knighton disappeared, Arthur knew that he would instantly forget all differences of rank, all lack of money or prospects, everything but his need of her.

And then?

The long dinner dragged its slow course in silence almost unbroken until the sweet-plates were removed and

the butler appeared with a vast gold loving-cup. After a ceremonious bow to the duchess, the old man proposed the toast of "Those who are not with us"; and Moyra whispered, with a glint of mischief in her eyes, that, as those who were not with the duke were against him, this was intended for Arthur and herself.

"I shall certainly think of you as I drink it," he replied. "Health, happiness . . . I should like to examine that cup some time."

"It's supposed to have been made by Cellini."

"Then it deserves something better than the present feeble flicker. What an amazing difference it would make," Arthur continued with an air of discovery, "if the whole of this place were properly lighted!"

"That would be my first reform if I ever had control," said Moyra. "The end of the dark ages . . . Perhaps I shall . . ."

Her eyes rested for a moment on Lady Rhayader's sadly smiling face; and Arthur tried to imagine what would happen if the duke, who seemed to be feeling his age for the first time, were to die that night. Would Knighton break perforce with his Mrs. Leveret and come back to preside over a council of regency until his own idiot father was dead? Would he seize this opportunity to do what he liked, leaving his mother and Moyra to administer the estate? It would not be long before Moyra was in single command; but would she consent, even for Moulton's sake, to give any more of her life to this unloved heritage? Would Mrs. Leveret crown her ambitions by installing herself here?

"Don't let the old man keep you up all night," Moyra whispered, when "The King" and "The Ladies" had been toasted. "I want to have a talk with you . . ."

“And I want to escape,” Arthur replied, “before I fall from grace again!”

This was the first time that they had been alone for the leisurely consumption of port at the semicircular table by the fire; and he involuntarily put himself in an attitude of defence. For this night, however, the duke seemed to have dropped back into a past long anterior to Moyra's first disobedience and all the woe that her marriage had brought into his world. His talk was of the golden wedding, now ancient history, at which he had been presented with the three-handled loving-cup, of the silver wedding, “which took place”—he explained—“some time before ye appeared on this planet, young man”, and of the original wedding, which had been honoured by Napoleon the Third.

“People married earlier in those days,” he observed, stretching his legs to the fire and sipping his wine eagerly. “When I was your age, Camelford, I had a son at Eton,” he boasted.

“Then I hope his pastors and masters were paid better than we were at Brampton, sir,” Arthur replied. “You can't marry on the salary we had in our first years.”

“Then the governing body, of which I'm a member, is greatly to blame. I believe in early marriages. A man can't give the best of himself when he's leading the unnatural life of a celibate. While ye're young and your blood is hot . . .”

“I think it's perhaps a good thing we're most of us compelled to wait, sir. When I think of my own susceptible youth . . .”

“Oh, aye! Find out where your taste lies, but don't spend too long over it. The odd women ye pick up are

not the same, ye know well, as a wife . . . The bottle stands."

Arthur filled his glass and made haste to push the decanter on.

"I'm afraid I have no first-hand experience of picking up odd women," he answered curtly. The duke was shaping for a night of unseemly confidences; and it was worth a snub, given or received, to check him. "People of my generation have so many things, apart from wine and women, to think about . . ."

"That ye spend your middle years committing all the follies ye should have outgrown as a boy!," the old man crowed. "I have 'ee on the hip there, Camelford! Young saints make old rakes. When this young idiot of a Knighton was in his teens, he couldn't speak to a woman without blushing. I warned his poor, foolish mother to expect a reaction. *Now* . . . The matter with your generation, m' friend, is that ye have a genius for missing all the pleasures of life while ye're of an age to enjoy them without trouble. Before ever her late majesty gave me my commission, there was a young play-actress . . ."

Arthur sighed and looked at his watch, wondering how soon he could escape to Moyra. At all times he detested this salacious talk—women, women, women!—; but it was doubly unsettling when he had just been reminded that he was one of those who were obliged by circumstances or temperament to lead "the unnatural life of a celibate". As though he did not know it! As though he did not sometimes feel like tinder waiting to be set ablaze by the first spark! By keeping himself in hard condition, he could—whatever the duke might say—give the best of himself to his work; but this erotic babble awoke a slumbering beast inside him. And nothing would stop

it! The old man had reached what could only be called his second childhood of prurient curiosity. He had often wondered, he was now confessing, how the bachelor members of the Brampton staff contrived to lead a healthy, normal life. It was not for them to preach morality to their boys by day and then to visit the Egeria of a milliner's shop by night. No, no, no, no, no! They could not always be slipping up to London.

"We were kept too hard at work, sir," Arthur replied impatiently, "to think much of all we might be missing."

"But ye won't pretend that's *natural*," the duke persisted with a fine show of reason. "'*Male and female created he them.*' And I won't pretend, with the best will in the world, I can believe 'ee, Camelford, whatever these fellows may have told 'ee. Why, it seems only the other day that one of Knighton's best friends got himself into a famous scrape by paying his addresses to the same lovely lady as one of the masters! What d'ye think of that? I needn't tell 'ee they met! Of course, neither could say anything against the other . . . The bottle stands!"

It was not difficult, Arthur reflected, to grasp why Moyra's dislike of this old man should be tinged with something like horror. Given the chance, he would talk in the same way before the youngest boy, deriving a vicious delight from gloating vicariously over pleasures that were now a distant memory and sneering at the shame which his recital aroused. So, at different times, he had doubtless held forth to his son and grandson, fuddling them with wine and inciting them to emulate his own exploits.

"I should like to think that a change has come over the relations between the sexes, sir," Arthur interposed at

the end of a disquisition that might have been entitled *Promiscuity Throughout The Ages*. "Now that we meet so much more freely . . ."

"*'Male and female created he them'*," the duke repeated. "*'Naturam expellas furca . . .'*" Will ye have no more wine? Then let's come along."

5

When they reached the long gallery, the ladies had already retired; and the duke lost no time before composing himself in his usual chair before a fire that might have been built for the roasting of a heretic. At once the placid sound of deep breathing was heard; and Arthur escaped on tiptoe to fetch his pipe and change into a smoking jacket.

It was too late, he decided, to call on Moyra; or so he would tell her next day, though the truth was that he felt too angry and disgusted. Angry with the duke and disgusted with his conversation: disgusted with the eternal refrain "*Male and female created he them*", as though one could never get away from sex, and angry because in his heart he knew it was true. They might not talk much of women at Brampton—as the duke would have said, it was cant to pretend Egeria did not exist if they were always chattering about her in common-room—; but Arthur knew that he at least was vaguely thinking of them all the time.

"I don't need any lecherous old man to taunt me with all I'm missing," he whispered. "The less I think about that, the better."

"THE UNNATURAL LIFE OF A CELIBATE"

If he would be honest with himself, he must admit that Moyra was hardly ever out of his thoughts. When her wonderful white arms twined about her boys' shoulders and she kissed them good-night, when her eyes shone and her lips parted in one of her dazzling smiles, when she spoke or laughed, he was watching, hungrily watching every movement of her slender body. And by himself in all his lonely magnificence he was for ever thinking of the light on her hair as she pulled off her hat in his rooms at Brampton, or the faint fragrance that greeted him on his return, or the warm pressure of her hand as she bade him good-bye.

Had he in some way betrayed this? Was the old man once more offering his favourite prescription for fevered blood?

A light was still shining from the window of Moyra's boudoir; and, suddenly changing his mind, Arthur made his way slowly downstairs and along the passage leading to her tower. If he could see her again, he might think less about her afterwards. A sound of voices met him as he ascended the stairs; and he found Lady Rhayader sitting in front of the fire and fidgetting nervously with a crumpled handkerchief.

"Come in, Arthur!," Moyra called out listlessly. "We were giving up hope . . . You can go on, darling: Arthur knows everything . . ."

Lady Rhayader gave an unhappy cluck.

"Well, I couldn't ask him to come here without giving a hint," Moyra defended herself. "And now if we're faced with a ship-wreck . . ."

"But you *can* prevent it if you want to," her mother-in-law exclaimed tremulously.

"If he openly goes off with this woman?"

"I don't believe he will!"

"You've seen his letter. He's asking me to end things."

"And, if you refuse, he'll come to his senses. All his family are *weak* about women, Moyra. I don't know whether it's long over-breeding. . . . They don't behave like other people, they don't expect to be judged like other people. All I say is: Give him *time*. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Camelford?"

Arthur was tempted to ask if ten years might not be considered a fair probation; but, as he looked at the older woman, he felt that she was employing a different language. Her question was impossible to answer with a simple "yes" or "no". Perhaps, asked by one generation, it could never be answered by another. Nothing was in fact being done in a hurry, but ten years of disappointment and humiliation must seem only a moment to one who had already known thirty of them. It was to be presumed that mothers expected at least the same sacrifices to be made for their sons as they had themselves made for their husbands. And the broken-spirited were always aghast at the recklessness of those who were as yet only half broken.

"I'm afraid I favour ending a thing the moment I see it can't be mended," Arthur replied. "I can only speak as an ignorant outsider, but I sometimes wonder why they've waited so long. The boys are bound to hear something, sooner or later." He could see Moyra wincing; but, if they wanted his opinion, he must give it honestly. "I don't see who gains by these pretences . . ."

"Ah, it's so easy to *talk* . . .," Lady Rhayader muttered.

"And I should have thought it was easy—imperative

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almost—to act now. Assuming Lord Knighton's in earnest . . . Nobody can stop him! "

"If the duke *decided* to stop him, he *would*," Lady Rhayader declared, less in menace than with the dismal certainty of a Cassandra.

"But how?," Arthur demanded.

This vague threat which they all uttered in turn, this obscure homage which they paid to the old man's power, this helpless resignation which he was himself coming to share had by now definitely got on his nerves. If the duke would make his great move or if any of them would even hint what it was to be, there might be some chance of meeting it.

"Ah, that I don't know!," Lady Rhayader sighed; and he was shocked to see that his involuntary sharpness of tone had caused her to tremble till her innumerable pendants and brooches jingled. "But I'm right." Her voice fell to a whisper. "I haven't lived here all these years with him for nothing. When things seem at their worst, they're never so bad as they become when you try to change them against his wishes. There was a time when I too . . . He won't simply stop the divorce . . . But I expect you think I'm only a silly, frightened old woman," she ended with a break in her voice, clutching at her handkerchief and moving to the door.

CHAPTER THREE

A WARNING

I

THE birthday celebrations introduced an era of superficial cordiality which made Arthur feel that—whether he liked it or not and for whatever motives he chose to ascribe—he was henceforth to rank as one of the family. As he finished his breakfast the next morning, the old man looked in to enquire why he never joined the rest of them on the battlements.

“ If it’s any idea of being ‘ in the way ’,” he added, “ I’m here to undeceive ’ee. Ye must come and go as ye please, but I submit it’s not healthy to move from table to desk and desk to table without filling your lungs.”

So bidden, Arthur made his way out of doors with something of the same feeling of initiation that he had experienced half a generation earlier when he was told that he might order himself his first-eleven cap. He was accepted, for whatever the compliment might be worth, though his inclination—after six weeks of almost solitary confinement—was to see less, not more, of the family and more, not less, of the outside world. The range of interests at Moulton was so circumscribed that one would really very soon become neurotic if one did not occasionally rub shoulders with normal men who were prepared to

talk about the budget and the Grand National, anything but Mrs. Leveret's last move and the duke's next.

The wind that was to fill his lungs blew freshly from the Welsh mountains; and Arthur faced it, bare-headed and with shut eyes, until he was roused by a distant hail from Moyra. Her sleep did not seem to have been disturbed either by her visit to London or by her duel with Lady Rhayader overnight; and, as he watched the meeting of her boys with the duchess and of herself with the duke, Arthur was driven to wonder, not for the first time, how many of the evil dreams which now robbed him of rest at night survived into his waking hours. Was—for instance—the benevolent old gentleman, at this moment pointing in triumph to his first crocuses, the same person as the old satyr who had so lately gloated over his successes in seduction? Was the smiling and rather stupid Lady Rhayader the tortured soul of the evening before?

Or had his own imagination, Arthur wondered, become deranged from an excess of his own company, a morbid dislike of the castle, too little exercise and too much good living. At Brampton the night was never long enough, but here he was always counting the quarters until his tea was brought him. And, in those restless hours when he slept with one eye open, the most monstrous fancies became convincing. As he dressed of a morning, he had always to ask himself: "Where are we now?"

"I want to thank you for your reports," Moyra called out. "And then we must talk about plans for the half-term. If you'd care to see your people, I could treat the boys to some theatres in London. You're beginning to look haggard, you know."

"Heaven knows, I've no reason to," Arthur laughed

a little feverishly. "As you suggest it, though, I should *like* to spend a night or two at Brampton some time. I want to arrange with a friend there to go through the boys' papers so that you can see independently whether I'm licking them into the required shape."

"Well, you've only to let my mother-in-law know when you're going and when you expect to be back. The duke insists that we're all neglecting you. If we are, it's the fault of this place, where everything is done by the calendar. Observe the prisoners coming into the exercise-yard! This happens to be the dullest time of the year, too . . ."

She quickened her pace to overtake Lady Rhayader, who was walking twenty yards ahead with the duchess leaning on her arm; and Arthur loitered behind to fill his pipe. For some reason Moyra had reverted to the manner—friendly, gay and essentially remote—with which she had tried to put him at his ease in the summer; and he did not know her well enough to say whether she was playing a part for the edification of the duke or intimating gently that one declaration, of the kind which his letter had contained, was all that she wanted. Well, she need not fear that he was going to protest his devotion every time they met. In the sane, clear light of early morning she seemed more unattainable than ever; and he wondered how he had ever allowed his pen to run away with him.

"I wonder, too, why the old man's turned so friendly all of a sudden," he murmured to himself. "If nothing here is ever done without a motive . . ."

At the moment, the duke was urging everybody forward, like a ring-master, and Arthur made haste to join the wholly ridiculous procession. He would not

have been surprised, with a man for whom nothing seemed too great or too small, to hear that there had been a preliminary inspection of shoes, shawls and coats; and, as the old autocrat shuffled along, his eye was on his watch. "Punctuality" was the sign, "routine" the countersign. In ten minutes' time he himself would disappear to his office; and the others would separate to school-room, housekeeper's room or library. Every day was like the one before. Even the hospitality of the castle was so ruled, like everything else, by custom that, when it was not the season to entertain a judge of assize or an itinerant cricket-eleven or a shooting-party, no one ever thought of inviting any one else to break the tedium of their unchanging lives.

"I've been explaining to Mr. Camelford that, now the duke's discovered he's not a recluse by choice, we've been charged to brighten his life," Moyra was telling her mother-in-law as Arthur came up with them. "Since the last pheasant-slaughter we've had no one to stay . . ."

"I'm afraid we're so much wrapped up in our own interests . . .," Lady Rhayader sighed, with a glance that might have been directed to the gate-house where her husband was incarcerated or, beyond it, to the unknown corner of France where her son was struggling in the toils of his enchantress. "Of course, if the duke *wants* any one invited . . ."

She led the shivering and exhausted duchess to a seat by the parapet and came back to finish her prescribed turn.

"This must be a most gigantic place to run even when no one's staying here," said Arthur, with an uneasy feeling that every one imagined him to be discontented. "Please don't think that I've *asked* to have my life brightened!"

"Oh, no! But one sometimes forgets that it's a very quiet house for young people. When I was your age . . . Now I have my duties. And whenever I can spare time for my modelling . . . If you're at all interested in that sort of thing, you must come to see my studio," she told Arthur.

"I didn't even know you had one!" He looked down, in bewilderment that time and habit were unable to diminish, on the roofs and towers, the courtyards and bridges of something that was more like a fortified city than a single mansion. To his right was the louvre of the banqueting-hall; below him, with nothing between the slates and heaven, lay the chapel; on the left was his own tower, with his own three muzzle-loaders. "I suppose I could live here for years without finding my way about," he added.

"And when you think you know every staircase and passage . . .," Lady Rhayader began, only to stop with the apprehensive turn of the head which they all employed—Moyra and Knighton, Mr. Trapp and Dr. Swinburne, even the bluff and care-free Gin-Fizz—if they thought the duke might be listening. "When I first came to live here," she continued, as though she had decided that her little anecdote was not a capital offence, "my husband was very anxious to have this electric-light put in. We made the strangest, most Harrison-Ainsworthy discoveries!"

"Sliding panels and secret staircases?" Arthur prompted her, as she hesitated again.

"Yes . . . If I remembered the way, I could get from my rooms to the duke's or from the long gallery to Moyra's without ever being seen. . . . I should very much like to shew you my studio some day," she

continued in a changed voice. "You can see just the windows from here . . ."

Arthur looked towards the gate-house with an adequate display of interest, but his mind was puzzling over Lady Rhayader's oddly conspiratorial air in talking about the ramifications of the castle. If this was a warning that the duke knew to a nicety where every one was and what every one did at any hour of the day, he had been given a similar hint on the first night he dined here, when Moyra talked of the old man's spy-system; he was reminded of it whenever he saw one of the night-watchmen in his hooded chair; and he knew that the duke could move very quietly. Though he had forgotten it till this moment, Arthur recalled the shock which he had received, the night of his arrival, on finding the old man wheezing in the doorway of the school-room when he imagined that he was alone with Moyra.

"I shall invite myself to call on you," he told Lady Rhayader, "the moment I get back. Moyra was suggesting I should take a few days off when she goes to London with the boys . . ."

"You're not going *with* her?," Lady Rhayader broke in.

Though the words contained only a question, the tone said: "*On no account must you do that!*"; and Arthur was startled by her vehemence. He had not thought of going to London, but the idea was harmless enough. From time to time Moyra had talked of their taking a Mediterranean cruise at Easter; and, if the family could swallow a camel without grimacing, there was no need to strain at a gnat. He was startled and vaguely annoyed, as though he were suspected of proposing an impropriety.

"No, I'm going to Brampton," he replied.

It was tempting to add sarcastically: "*I presume you've no objection to that?*"; but Lady Rhayader, who seemed unaccountably on edge this morning, had hurried back to the duchess.

2

Later in the day Arthur had reason to be glad he had curbed his temper. As he came to the end of his solitary dinner, there was a knock at his door and Lady Rhayader put her head in—with a rather unconvincing air of impulsiveness—to ask why he should not pay his visit then and there. The duchess had gone to her room; Moyra was closeted with the duke, discussing the future of the house in London.

"And bring your pipe with you," she added. "Charlie always says he can't talk unless he's smoking. I tell him he'll have to mend his ways before he takes his seat in the House of Lords."

Arthur assented with an alacrity that was inspired chiefly by curiosity. Was this invitation—issued with such pitiful sprightliness—poor, kindly Lady Rhayader's contribution to the campaign for brightening his life? Did she want to explain away her lachrymose collapse overnight, to pump him—like Mrs. Leveret and the duke and Gillingham—for Moyra's real feelings, to invoke his aid in making her see reason, or had she something to say which the duke's proximity had stifled when they met on the battlements? Alternately silent and garrulous, she was more nervous even than usual.

"I hope I shall be able to find my way back," Arthur observed, as they made their way towards the gate-house. "This is all unexplored territory to me."

"It's rather noisy," said Lady Rhayader, "but you see all the comings and goings. As my husband gets about so little since his accident, it's pleasant for him. A terrible affliction to be paralysed, Mr. Camelford! I don't wonder that Moyra is against hunting. She puts it on humanitarian grounds, of course, because she doesn't want to seem fussy, but I know she shares my *dread* . . ."

Arthur acknowledged this confidence with a murmur of sympathy. So here was the official camouflage to cover Lord Rhayader's seclusion; and he wished he had been spared it. Of late he had been thinking less and less of the bald and bearded man whom he had seen once and never again; but, whenever he penetrated to a new part of the castle, he caught himself wondering where in all this stone labyrinth the unhappy creature kept his hiding-place. Had he been removed or killed and buried, Arthur would have been none the wiser; but the thought that they were now within a few yards of one another, that he might be required to look on a slobbering face and to clasp a flabby hand, was unnerving.

"The studio's up those stairs," Lady Rhayader explained with somewhat more than her normal breathlessness, when they reached the gate-house. "I should so much like to have a little talk with you, though, before we see that. And I want to get it over before Moyra or the duke can interrupt us. It's about last night. And all this trouble over Charlie. I shouldn't like you to get a wrong impression . . ."

"But I felt so very sorry for you!," Arthur exclaimed. "You naturally want to do all you can to patch things up . . ."

An uncomfortable silence was punctuated by the opening and shutting of a door, the poking of a fire and the super-

fluorous pushing of furniture, the whole accompanied by a tiny, persistent tinkle of antiquated, prized ornaments.

"And, even more, I don't want them to get worse. Won't you sit down?"

Arthur pulled a chair to the fire and began to fill his pipe. In mitigation of their life-sentences, the prisoners at Moulton were evidently allowed to furnish and decorate their cells in their own taste. From his study of old *Punches* it seemed as if the Rhayaders had settled here in the last days of the æsthetic, blue-and-white, *bric-à-brac* movement; and nothing, apparently, had been altered since.

"I don't see how things could well be *worse* than they are," he murmured. "I gather Knighton's definitely asking for a divorce . . ."

"It would be worse for us all if Moyra tried and failed," said Lady Rhayader. "This is not the first time Charlie has gone quite mad," she continued with a sigh. "She's forgiven him before."

"But apparently he doesn't want to be forgiven now."

"The fact that she's taken him back in the past . . . When the duke hears of this, he'll say that she didn't care how Charlie behaved until she wanted to be free on her own account."

"And her reply will be that she wouldn't think of a divorce now if she wasn't threatened with public scandal."

Lady Rhayader lowered the paper which she was holding to screen her face from the fire.

"A scandal?" she repeated.

"Well, if her husband is openly going about everywhere with another woman . . ."

"Oh, I see! . . ." A long silence followed; and the paper was once more brought into play, this time as a

shield against her neighbour. "Mr. Camelford, this is dreadfully difficult for me to say, but in everybody's interests . . . I'm afraid Moyra may be threatened with a scandal of another kind. She has really been rather indiscreet. You too, perhaps . . ."

"I?" Arthur cried.

This, if it were not so comic, would be really intolerable. To be called indiscreet when one had strained discretion to the limit of human endurance and beyond! He stood up abruptly, scattering pipe, pouch and matches in three different directions.

At once Lady Rhayader's moment of daring passed; and she held out her disengaged hand as though she were begging him not to be angry with her.

"I'm only quoting the duke," she defended herself. "Some conversation that he accidentally overheard . . ."

"I shall be very much interested . . .," Arthur began stiffly.

"If you want his actual words, they were: 'I hope we're not going to have trouble with that young man.' Well, that was absurd. I knew Moyra, even if I didn't know you in those days. I thought no more till he said only the other night how strange it was that two people living in the same house should find it necessary to exchange daily letters. When I say you've perhaps been indiscreet . . ."

"I sent Moyra my half-term reports," Arthur interrupted hotly. "In addition, I have written her one letter and one only . . ."

He stopped suddenly and bent to sweep away the ashes spread by his falling pipe. His own share of the correspondence contained phrases and sentiments that he would not have used in cool blood, but the recipient of a

letter was not responsible for the sender's follies; and nothing that Moyra ever wrote . . .

"I don't know, of course, what either of you said . . .," Lady Rhayader was faltering.

"I can assure you . . .," Arthur began, then stopped with a sudden feeling of hollowness.

Now that he came to think of it, he had been prevented from finishing Moyra's letter by the unexpected arrival of the duke. He had slipped it under a book, on a table which had been tidied and littered and tidied again—by his friendly, trusted Mallet, who was nonetheless the duke's servant—half-a-dozen times in the last twenty-four hours; and then he had forgotten all about it.

"But, Mr. Camelford!," Lady Rhayader was protesting. "I'm afraid I've expressed myself badly. I know it's *unthinkable* that you and Moyra . . ."

"Then please forgive me for becoming rather excited! I'm so extraordinarily sorry for Moyra that the very idea of adding to her troubles . . ."

Leaving the sentence unfinished, he sat down to receive the rest of his lecture with what attention he could muster. If his courage had not failed him, he would have asked: "*Are you sure it's unthinkable for your son or for the duke to suspect us? And to want to suspect us?*" Fragments of an old imaginary dialogue were piecing themselves together in his brain. Yes, he had it now! The scene was Moyra's sitting-room at *The Feathers* in Brampton; the time, those last moments after dinner when he was arranging to come for his half-term holiday to Moulton. He had been wondering whether the rest of the family endorsed her invitation; and in a moment of cynicism he had tried to stand in the shoes of her exasperated husband and his grandfather. "*She wouldn't be half so trouble-*

some," he had made the old man say, "*if she had any interest outside her precious boys:*" and on Knighton's lips he had put a sneer at the sexlessness of American women: "*Moyra's not the kind to 'console' herself . . .*" And finally—Arthur could remember it all now!—, because he felt that she was treating him like a tame cat, he had wound up his fanciful debate with a contemptuous speech by the duke: "*If she had some one who would chatter about books and music, like that young schoolmaster . . .*"

"Please speak quite frankly," Arthur urged. "I'm ready to leave the castle to-night . . ."

"I trust you implicitly," Lady Rhayader replied. "You *do* see, though, how disastrous it would be if the duke for any reason . . ."

"Thought that Moyra was paying Knighton in his own coin?," Arthur suggested, as she hesitated. "Oh, yes! If he faked a case, he could no doubt stop her from getting her divorce." His memory woke to the echo of another conversation, not imaginary this time, and he saw himself shifting uncomfortably from one foot to another while old Gin-Fizz, in his most deliberately irritating mood, dragged off his shooting-boots and held forth on the folly of interfering between man and wife. "*Don't be too sympathetic,*" he had urged. And then had come an apparently irrelevant warning that "the Cast-Iron Duke", as he always called him, was probably the most thorough-paced ruffian in Christendom. "I'm assuming, though, that the duke won't want to cover up one scandal by inventing another. You know him, of course, far better than I do . . ."

As he paused, Lady Rhayader moved silently to the embrasure behind her chair.

"They're still there," she murmured, her eyes on the lighted windows of the banqueting-hall. "What they can be talking about all this time . . . Yes, I probably know him better than any one else!" she broke out with sudden and startling passion. "That's why I'm *frightened!* I've begged you, I beg you *again*, to believe that, if he's made up his mind Moyra's not to divorce Charlie, she *won't!* *How* he'll do it I don't pretend to guess, but you would both of you be playing into his hands if you did the slightest thing to make him suspect . . ." The heavy curtains fell into place; and she felt her way back to her chair as though the room were spinning round her. "Now you see why it would have been out of the question for you to go up to London with Moyra and the boys. . . . They're putting out the lights downstairs, so I mustn't say anything more for the present. If you don't mind, I'll leave the studio till another night. I'm feeling quite exhausted! But I'm glad to have had this talk with you. . . . If anything's said, it's no good pretending you've not been here this evening. He'll know."

3

As he returned to his own rooms, Arthur felt that he was not so much surprised as he ought to have been, perhaps not even so much surprised as Lady Rhayader might have suspected. When all was said and done, she had told him nothing that he did not know already.

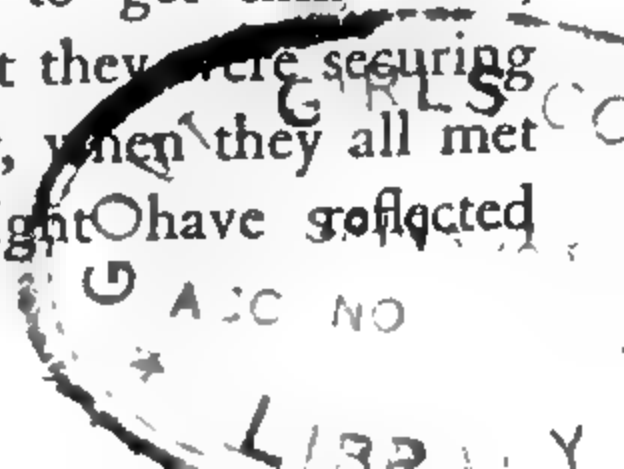
"Except about our 'daily exchange of letters' . . ."

Locking the door, he ransacked every corner of his sitting-room for the missing note. It was not to be found;

and he became conscious of a queer satisfaction. Here at last, in a nightmare of conjecture and suspicion, was the fact of a theft; and the next thing to discover was whether a similar theft had been practised over his own letter to Moyra. After that—for what it might be worth—he could consider dispassionately whether the duke was trying to make trouble or to prevent it. With any one else the answer would have been easy: two people were drifting into a dangerous intimacy and, in his grandson's absence, the old man had taken upon himself to intercept their letters. It was high-handed, unscrupulous even, but the good name of the family was at stake. And the intercepted letters had confirmed the duke's worst fears. That would be his story. The world would believe him. And half the world would approve.

The other story was that the old man had thrown these same young people together and was waiting to catch them red-handed. That would be believed—grudgingly—by the handful of people who shared Moyra's conviction that the duke was mad. What Arthur himself believed he could not yet determine, though he must make up his mind before he undertook to hand on Lady Rhayader's warning. If—to use her word—they had been merely “indiscreet”, no irreparable harm was done; if they had walked into a trap, they must walk out of it before it closed on them.

Assuming the worst, it would be interesting—Arthur felt—to know how long the old man had been digging his pit. In September, when they were all trying—first directly and then behind his back—to get him there, Knighton and he probably fancied that they were securing an ally against Moyra. In November, when they all met to talk things over, the duke might have reflected



sardonically that the cajoleries of an attractive young woman had made possible what was definitely impossible two months earlier. And in January, when he grumbled to Lady Rhayader that he hoped they were not going to have trouble, he might more honestly have said that, with luck, they might be spared the trouble that Moyra, for want of anything better to do, always made over her husband's peccadilloes. Let her be innocently amused . . .

"So far there's nothing to make it necessary for any one to tamper with my correspondence. An innocent friendship . . . If the old devil hadn't tried to work me up by talking about 'the unnatural life of a celibate' I should have said he was only being damned meddlesome and damned prudish. Once admit the possibility that you'll encourage your own grandson's wife to go off the rails . . ."

The trap, unless this were all the heated fancy of delirium, must have been prepared at the moment when the duke discovered or divined that his infatuated grandson had passed beyond the appeal of reason or even fear. Perhaps Knighton had written to say that he was asking Moyra to set him free; perhaps he had told his grandfather, on his last visit, that they had reached their breaking-point. However the knowledge came, the old man had lost no time in acting on it. And there was no time to lose, Arthur decided, if he hoped to put Moyra on the defensive.

"And *he* doesn't know that *I* know!"

Descending to the long gallery, he made for the table where the new books were set out. Before the customary pile of blazing logs, the old man was sitting in his customary chair with his long ebony cane across his knees and with his hands clasped over his stomach. The open-

ing and shutting door disturbed him no more than the chiming of the clock over his head; and, except for the gentle rise and fall of his chest, he might have been dead or in a trance. Arthur chose a book at random and tiptoed out of the room. Here, if he followed his nightly habit, the duke would remain, gently recocking a seven-course dinner and two bottles of wine, till the footmen came in to put out the lights; and, if Moyra had not gone to bed, they were safe from interruption for the first time that day.

"Not that I must stay more than five minutes," Arthur warned himself as one of the night-watchmen murmured an incurious good-evening. If he had wanted to get up to mischief, this was the last house in the world to choose for it! "I shouldn't be taking even this amount of risk if I didn't feel that every moment counted!"

At various times, no doubt, in the last sixty years the duchess and Lady Rhayader had done nothing, because they were frightened, because there seemed nothing to do, because they did not grasp that anything was being done against them. And then they had waked to find that the old spider had completed his web. Moyra and he would find the same thing if they sat with hands folded, waiting till Lord Gillingham returned to England.

Arthur mounted the twisting stairs three at a time. The hanging iron lanterns had been extinguished lately enough for a smell of hot metal to pervade the darkness; and, as Moyra put them out herself when she went to her room, it was a fair assumption that she was not yet in bed. He continued on his way, with one hand clutching the rail on the outer wall, until he was arrested by the sound of shuffling footsteps and rapid breathing ahead of him. The footsteps might be any one's; not so that high thin whistle

which Arthur had heard a dozen times on the battlements and in the rose-garden when, forgetting their difference of age, he had set too good a pace for his companion. And yet how could an old man have raced ahead of him without being seen? And what was the little fiend doing?

In sudden panic Arthur hurried back the way he had come. It mattered nothing that, when the watchmen reported his movements in the morning, the duke would put his own construction on this guilty, headlong flight. Until his nerves were a little steadier, until he had overcome the horror—yes, it was not too strong a word!—of feeling that he was being watched through peep-holes, Arthur did not want to meet any one.

“Lady Rhayader may call it Harrison-Ainsworthy . . . ,” he whispered, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand.

Collecting himself for the silent scrutiny of the watchmen, he returned to the long gallery. It would be interesting to observe the old man’s entry, the more so if in fact he had been sleeping with one eye open eight minutes before. Perhaps, when he saw the same figure bending over the same table of books, he too would get something of a shock. Perhaps . . .

He spun round at the tap of an ebony cane on the parquet floor. The duke had come in at the opposite end to the one where Arthur expected him and was making for his favourite chair.

“Evening to ’ee, Camelford,” he piped. “Finding yourself something to read? Quite right, quite right, quite right! When ye’re my age and this artificial light blinds ’ee . . .”

“I took up this Foch biography, sir, and then found

that it was in two volumes and I hadn't the first. Ah, here it is! . . . I suppose Lady Knighton's turned in by now? She wanted to see me about the holidays, she said."

"She was going to bed when we said good-night," the duke answered. "And I'm bound that way myself. Ye must tell me some time what ye think of my daughter-in-law as a sculptor. 'Modelling', she calls it; *I* say it's 'muddling'. But if it amuses her . . . They say there's an artist and a drunkard and a saint in every family. I'm not sure about the saint, though we've had two archbishops . . . However, I mustn't keep 'ee gossiping! Good-night to 'ee, Camelford! Sleep well, my boy!"

4

Arthur waited till the following afternoon before making another attempt to see Moyra.

Since the episode of the stolen letter he was debarred from writing to her; and, as the duke seemed able to be in two places at once and to know at the same time what was happening in every part of the castle, it was unsafe to exchange confidences even when they were separated from him by the length of the battlements. At intervals during the night Arthur had started up in bed with a feeling that there was some one in the room; and in the morning he found himself counting the days till the end of term with an impatience that he had never known even at Brampton. It would not do to give in to one's nerves, but the atmosphere of this place was beginning to upset him.

"That little devil, creeping about . . ."

And presumably the strain was beginning to shew in his

looks or manner. When he met the duke after luncheon, tapping his way along the flagged paths of a now water-logged rose-garden, he was hailed with the question when he proposed to give himself a holiday.

"Ye're losing your colour," the old man piped. "I shall turn 'ee over to Dr. Swinburne if ye can't do more credit to the place. Have ye lost your appetite? Can't ye sleep?"

Arthur protested that he had never felt better; and, if he failed to convince the duke, he succeeded—for the moment—in convincing himself. If it came to a test of endurance, he could outlast them all! In the watery sunshine of a February afternoon the white-haired little figure in the faintly clerical black cloak and shovel hat seemed too fragile for a tug-of-war with any one a third of his age, though he was gradually sapping the vitality of his grandson's wife, as he had long sapped that of Lady Rhayader and the duchess. Never should it be said that he was crushing the tutor as he had already crushed his chaplain and doctor! And never must Arthur admit that he had nerves for any one to upset! Moyra had put everything into proper perspective six months ago, when she told him that the old man was not quite sane.

"Once you grasp that," Arthur reasoned with himself, "everything else follows. This pretty little scheme, to get us entangled. This creeping and crawling about the castle . . ."

Anyway, this was the most depressing season of the year; there was not enough exercise for a man accustomed to football three times a week. Anything rather than a confession of defeat!

"My little granddaughter tells me ye think of going to Brampton for the week-end," the old man continued.

"I was playing with the idea, sir," Arthur replied, "but it occurs to me that the place will be deserted. Half-term, you know."

"If ye could wait till Wednesday, ye might come with me. I've a meeting of the governing body on Thursday morning."

Arthur felt a sudden craving for the homeliness of his old school. Little Ramsden, he presumed, would still be twittering about the dignity of the second master. Finnigan would be picking gratuitous quarrels with those who sought salvation in "dead" languages. They would receive him with the suspicion of wolves welcoming one of the pack after an experiment in domestication. It was a petty life, it had seemed an exasperating life, but its dull sanity was comforting. To go and return in the duke's company, however, would be no holiday.

"I'm afraid that's the middle of a working week, sir," he answered.

"I shall only be away one night. Two, at most. Ye must do what ye think's best, though. May we look forward to seeing 'ee here for the holidays? Ye were going to discuss the question with Moyra."

"I hope to catch her this afternoon. I was too late last night. If she wants me to take the boys abroad somewhere . . ."

The suggestion was thrown out as a challenge; and the duke accepted it in the least expected way.

"Ye mustn't let her overwork 'ee," he urged. "The willing horse deserves his rest like another. However, that's for you and her to decide. If ye change your mind about coming to Brampton for a couple of nights, ye've only to let me know."

Arthur bowed and passed on into the park, where he

could see Moyra and her boys setting out for a walk. All three were carrying spades; and, when he overtook them, she explained that they were looking for the remains of a Roman temple which an antiquarian ancestor of the duke's had uncovered and buried again at the end of the eighteenth century.

"If you're going to help, you must get yourself a tool," she told him. "D'you know where the shed is?"

"I can find it if you tell me. Or perhaps you'll shew me the way." He paused to let the boys go on ahead. "If you're going to London this week-end, Moyra, I think I'd better stay here. I had a long talk with Lady Rhayader last night . . ." He paused again, furious to feel that he was blushing. "She warned me that it might be very awkward for you if the duke imagined we were becoming too great friends. He has in fact said something to her. And I've had hints from other quarters. If we both went away at the same time, he'd feel sure we'd arranged to meet . . ."

He waited for her to round on him as he had himself rounded on the shrinking Lady Rhayader overnight, but she only sighed in extreme weariness.

"Did you suggest," she asked, "that he might set his own side of the house in order before he interested himself in mine?"

"I didn't feel it was the moment for retorts of that kind. If he's guessed that you're even thinking of a divorce . . . Did he call on you, by any chance, last night?"

"No. Why?"

Arthur walked for a few moments in silence.

"He went as far as your door," he then answered. "I know that, because I was coming to see you myself.

If . . .” He wanted to say : “ *If he’s spying on us . . .*”, but the words stuck in his throat. “ If he’s collecting mud to throw at you . . . ,” he substituted.

“ He’ll have some difficulty in finding any that will stick.”

“ I’m not so sure. Moyra . . . , Moyra, you remember the letter I wrote while you were in London? Did you destroy it? ”

She shook her head, colouring as their eyes met :

“ I thought it was so charming of you that I kept it”

“ And you still have it?,” Arthur persisted. “ I ask because the letter you sent me has disappeared.”

Moyra betrayed no surprise. Her attitude towards life at Moulton was always that nothing could surprise her, but her mouth hardened.

“ It *should* be under lock and key,” she answered, “ but it’s a mistake ever to say what things ‘ should ’ be here. We can very soon make sure.”

Calling out to the boys that they were to go on without her, she turned back towards the castle. Something, which she would not explain, caused her to laugh rather sadly, but she shewed none of the indignation that Arthur had expected.

“ If the duke’s got hold of your letter to me,” he was constrained to point out, “ he knows from the first page that Knighton’s asking you to set him free. I hadn’t time to read more than that”

“ You hadn’t time ?,” repeated Moyra.

“ I was interrupted. . . . I say, this really isn’t a joking matter, you know. If he’s seen my letter to you Well, we should find it very hard to explain away. Assume, for the purpose of argument, that he’s

trying to make out a case against you. We shall have to be frightfully careful. Any idea of going away together for the Easter holidays could be so twisted . . .”

“But all this is no reason why you shouldn’t go away this week-end,” said Moyra. “If I stay here under observation, it comes to the same thing. I imagine the healthiest animals pine the most in captivity. You look as if you needed a change.”

“So the duke seemed to think! He offered to take me with him when he goes to Brampton for the governors’ meeting next week. I said I couldn’t play truant for two nights in full term . . .”

He looked up to find Moyra observing him with raised eyebrows:

“But he told you when he was going and how long he would be away? That was very considerate of him! Almost like saying: ‘*The coast’s clear!*’”

“Then you *do* think he’s trying to make mischief? I was wondering all night if it wouldn’t be best for me to go away altogether . . .”

Moyra pointed towards the rose-garden, where the old man was shuffling up and down by himself, then laid a finger on her lips.

“That would be an admission that you’d been found out and were afraid to face the music!,” she whispered. “It happens that there’s nothing to find out. If people insist on jumping to conclusions, that’s their affair.”

“But I should never forgive myself if you got into trouble on my account. I had no business to write as I did, but I felt so frightfully sorry for you . . . If you like, I’ll bring things to a head by complaining that my papers have been interfered with. Let him justify himself if he can!”

A WARNING

"He'd meet you with a flat denial! No, he mustn't know that *we* know. If we could give them something serious to think about for a change! Don't worry about *me*! My maid sleeps in the next room, with the communicating-door open, so I don't fear any number of false witnesses. However, I'm much obliged for the warning."

She walked swiftly into the rose-garden, leaving Arthur to find his way behind the maze to a shrubbery in which the potting sheds and tool-houses were screened from view. As she hurried past the duke, they exchanged a question and answer about the boys' excavations; and the false cordiality of their voices made Arthur feel that insincerity was an element in the very air they all breathed. There was nothing to choose between any of them! Lady Rhayader seemed at the moment to be working against the duke, but it was all in secret. She would work for him if he applied pressure enough. As for the servants! Arthur's belief in the fundamental decency of his fellow-creatures received a shock when he realized that a man who professed smiling devotion to his face habitually went behind his back to tamper with private papers. Where did it end? Was Moyra's maid encouraged to conduct a campaign of counter-espionage?

"At school you do at least tell a fellow frankly what you think of him," he grumbled. "If he doesn't like it, you can fight the thing out. It's the *falseness* of everything here . . ."

5

Arming himself with a pick-axe, Arthur returned to the now deserted rose-garden as Moyra came out of the castle.

Her eyes were brighter than usual, but she smiled blithely as they set out across the park.

"Well, it wasn't there," she told him. "I thought of leaving a note to say the old man could keep it, but it will be more interesting to see if he puts it back."

"If he'd meant to, he'd have done it long ago."

"I don't *think* he'll find it particularly useful, but the position's rather different if he knows what Charlie's been saying. Would you care to walk with me to the village? I was thinking that, if I telegraphed to Paris, I might catch father. It's a shame to drag him back, but I feel we must really come to an understanding. I'll just tell the boys where I'm going."

As she strode gaily ahead through the high wet grass, Arthur was compelled to reluctant admiration of her spirit. If the duke was cast-iron, she was fine-tempered steel; but her sudden determination alarmed him.

"If your father tells you to take the plunge, have you thought out the next step?," he asked.

"I shall leave here without waiting even to pack!," she laughed. "Why?"

"Well, you won't want *me* any more. My position, from the first, has been pretty ambiguous. You mustn't give the duke any opportunities . . ."

"We can talk about that later. If I go to my father, I don't think any one can say anything. Your position will be just the same as it is here . . ."

"But you *do* see what the old man's up to? He's deliberately chucking us at each other's heads . . . I shall clear out."

In the distance an eager voice hailed them:

"Mummie! Mr. Camelford! Come and see what we've found!"

A WARNING

Moyra moved quickly forward to the edge of a trench in which the two boys, bemired to the eyes, were rooting for fragments of tessellated pavement.

"Eddie's found a coin!," Moulton proclaimed. "Can he keep it, mummie, or is it treasure trove?"

"You'd better ask the duke," said Moyra. "Don't make yourselves too hot, children. Mr. Camelford and I are going to the post-office."

"Well, don't keep him too long!," Eddie begged. "We want him to come and dig. You too!"

Moyra laughed and moved away in the direction of the village.

"They'll miss you," she murmured.

"And I shall miss them," Arthur replied.

"Truthfully? I thought, when you talked of going, that you must be sick and tired of us and our troubles. It wouldn't be very surprising . . ."

"I admit that this eternal feeling of conspiracy was beginning to get on my nerves, but I would have seen you through as long as you were here."

"And yet you must see that everything will be a thousand times easier when we're *not* here."

Arthur walked in silence to the lodge-gates leading to Moulton village. It were waste of energy to elaborate his reasons for rejecting a proposal which Moyra's father, for one, and her solicitor, for another, would veto out of hand. If she had for once thought of herself or of him, she must have seen that he could not meet her on the same terms when Knighton's shadow no longer lay between them.

"The duke has not been the only difficulty," he answered at last. "If you'd read between the lines of my letter . . ."

"And, if you'd read more than the first page of mine," she interrupted impatiently, "instead of leaving it for the duke, you might have seen that I've had my own difficulties in the last few months. You've been very sympathetic, very helpful, very forbearing, but there have been times when I've wondered whether you'd ever *begin* to understand. However . . . What difficulties have there been beside the duke?"

"You know quite well! Or perhaps you *don't*! I remember you told me months ago that you were dead and didn't even know whether you cared about coming to life again. Perhaps you live in such a world of your own . . ."

"You admit it *was* some months ago . . ."

"If you want it quite simply, I find great difficulty . . . As long as you have a husband, it's one thing . . . I know I'm an absolute fool, but you can't always help yourself . . . You must see that I can't go on living in the same house . . . Or perhaps you still don't! If, as you say, you're 'dead' . . ."

He broke off and held out his hand, forcing a smile, to beg forgiveness for his ill-temper.

"That phrase seems to rankle," Moyra sighed. "And yet it was true when I used it."

Forgetful of the boys behind them and the lodge in front, Arthur clutched at her wrist:

"And you mean it's no *longer* true?"

"If you'd read my letter . . . *Now*, perhaps, you understand why I was laughing a moment ago. It was so delicious to think that only the duke had seen my impassioned outpourings. . . . Yes, my dear, they were very fairly impassioned. Something seemed to have gone snap all of a sudden. I should have thought the very

first lines of all . . . Short of making an incision in your head with that pick-axe, Arthur, I really can't do much more to aid your sometimes *rather* slow understanding! "

"My God! What . . . What are you going to do, Moyra? "

Disengaging her hand, she pulled off her hat and stood with the wind blowing through her hair.

"I haven't had time to think," she answered, abruptly sober. "Until a few weeks ago, Moulton and Eddie were the only living creatures I cared for; and I would have put up with anything for them. *Now* . . ."

"Now? "

"Come on to the post-office! I've honestly had no time to think."

PART FOUR

CHAPTER ONE

INTERVAL FOR DREAMING

I

"If ye won't come with me, Camelford, ye can at least charge me with a message to your old colleagues," said the duke. "Frankly, I think it's absurd for 'ee to stay here by yourself . . ."

"But Lady Knighton didn't say definitely when she was bringing the boys back," Arthur replied. "I *must* be ready to start work as soon as they come."

"Well . . . No doubt ye know your own business best. May I tell Dr. Irving that ye have no serious complaints against us?"

"That would be an understatement, sir! I was quite well off at Brampton, but I don't think any one *could* be better off than I am now."

"Ye have the quadruple blessings of youth, health, a good conscience and a contented mind. . . . These steps are slippery! If ye'll be kind enough to lend me an arm, it's time I started."

Arthur accompanied the old man to his waiting car and loitered, struggling with his impatience, while the last touches were given to a ceremonial departure that could hardly have been more impressive had the duke been one of his own ancestors setting out on a crusade. The

groom of the chambers—pale modern makeshift for a seneschal—hovered attentive for his lord's last commands, bowing him into one car and motioning his valet into another. Lady Rhayader, lacking only the wimple and keys of the traditional *châtelaine*, stood framed in the gateway which she was to guard until his return from the wars. And at an open window high up the frowning side of the castle the duchess sat mournfully waving a handkerchief as though she doubted whether he would in fact come back alive.

Like all the display which the old man considered his due, so much pomp—however picturesque—seemed to Arthur excessive for the occasion. Similar visits to Brampton took place three times in every year; but the duke was apparently unable to move eighty miles without a chaplain to bless the expedition and a body-physician to pronounce him fit. Silhouetted above the parapet of the round tower, a liveried veteran made ready to haul down the flag as the first car started; and at the far end of the long yew-lined avenue the lodge-keeper was already standing to attention by the open gate.

“I wish it had been a better day,” murmured Dr. Swinburne with mild professional anxiety. “He's got a cold on him as it is.”

“I'm interested to know that he can condescend to such human frailties,” said Arthur. “I shouldn't have thought all this dawdling was particularly good.”

Though curiosity or herd-hypnotism had drawn him to swell the respectful throng in the courtyard, he was now fretting to get away by himself before Moyra came back from London. Her last, enigmatic words were that they both needed a little leisure for thinking. “An interval for dreaming, if you like,” she had continued, suddenly

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wistful, "before we have to face the unpleasant realities of life."

With a final waving of hands, the stately procession started; and Arthur set out by himself across the park. Leisure for thinking . . . He was in love with her; and she, apparently, with him. In a year's time she might be a free woman, if she did not change her mind or have it changed for her. And then? Did her phrase about "an interval for dreaming" mean that, when he awoke in his right mind, he would see for himself that love was not everything, that he had had his romance, but that romance was not life?

"No money! No prospects! No position!," he enumerated without pity. "And she's the mother of a future duke! In the eyes of the world it would be like bolting with your chauffeur! My God, when the duke died, I might have to run this place! I'm very sure Knighton never will."

He turned at the lodge-gates to watch the outline of the castle fading and the windows starting to life for an instant before they were shuttered and curtained. If this was one of her "unpleasant realities", the sooner he faced it the better. . . .

As he strode moodily along the road to Hereford, a car passed him, then stopped and backed slowly. A woman's head looked out; and he hurried up to hear his name tentatively called. Of all unlikely people to meet in such a place at such a time, Mrs. Leveret was extending a languid hand to him and giving thanks for the amazing fortune of this unexpected encounter.

"Are we anywhere near Moulton?," she enquired.

"I'm on my way to friends in Wales . . ."

"You're within a mile of the castle," Arthur told her.

"I understood, when last I saw you, that you were going to spend the rest of the winter abroad."

"I was called back. Some tiresome business. If I'd only *known* I should be passing the duke's very gates . . . I'm so silly about maps."

"I'm afraid you'll draw blank at the moment. Lady Knighton and the boys are in London. Lady Rhayader's visiting her dentist in Hereford. And the duke's gone to Brampton for the night. If I can take any messages . . ."

"Oh, just say I enquired after them all. If I'd known I should be so near, I should certainly have tried to catch a glimpse of them. They're all well? And you too, I hope? Perhaps on my return journey I might look in."

Though the wind blowing in through the open door caused Mrs. Leveret to shiver and pull her furs about her, she seemed in no hurry to end this exchange of banalities; and Arthur waited patiently on the chance that she would betray her true reason for being in England, when every one thought she was abroad, and on her way to "friends in Wales", when the road happened to lead past the castle into Shropshire. Was she running away from Knighton? Had he sent her to find out Moyra's intentions? Or was she spying on her own account?

"I expect you'll find everybody here by the end of the week," he told her. "Except, perhaps, Lord Knighton. He's been away for some time now."

"I heard he was in Paris," replied Mrs. Leveret, "but I haven't seen him since that night you dined with me. . . . Well, if we stay talking any more, I shall be late. So nice to see you like this."

The languid hand waved once more, the languid voice murmured an order through the speaking-tube; and, a moment later, Arthur was alone with his own unanswered

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questions. So she had not plucked up courage to go off with Knighton and force Moyra's hand! If she was to be believed, they had not met for a month. And any one who knew her impatient lover would say that it was an even chance whether he broke with her and came back, asking his wife to forgive him. It was one thing, when Knighton begged to be set free, for Moyra to accept the inevitable and proclaim her right to a little happiness for herself; it was something altogether different to turn away a penitent when every one was urging her to take him back for her sons' sake. The "interval for dreaming" was likely to prove shorter than even Arthur had suspected. For a moment, as she stood with her hand in his and the wind blowing through her hair, it had seemed as though nothing could part them.

"Now . . ."

Seating himself on the stump of a tree by the boys' abandoned trench, he stared at the outline of the castle until it became lost in the enveloping darkness. An owl hooted. A fox barked. Gradually a pale effulgence shewed where the rising moon was struggling to penetrate a cloud. Though his teeth were beginning to chatter, Arthur did not feel cold. He was too tired, too empty, too bored for that.

"If I could see the faintest *purpose* in anything . . .," he muttered.

Somewhere behind him a dead bough cracked in the tangled bracken. A woman, walking rapidly by herself, became visible as something darker than the surrounding darkness.

"There's a deep hole just in front of you," Arthur called out. "If you skirt these trees . . ."

The figure stopped, with a hand pressed to its heart.

"It's *you*! Oh, you gave me such a fright!"

"Moyra! I thought you were in London!"

"I had to come back! What are you doing *here*?"

"I really don't know. I started out for a walk . . ."

"I . . . I certainly never expected to see *you*." She gave him her hands and stood breathing quickly. "Did you choose this place too . . . ? I came here instinctively! After that other day . . ."

"I hardly knew I *was* here. Moyra . . . There's no fresh trouble, is there? I didn't expect you till to-morrow . . ."

"I just couldn't bear to be away any longer. You never thought I could feel homesick for this place, did you? . . . Won't you say you've missed me, Arthur . . . ?"

"If I told you what these last days had been like . . .," he began fiercely.

Then the control which he had imposed on himself for the last two months broke suddenly; and he caught her in his arms, raining kisses on her eyes and mouth.



Half a mile away, the clock in the courtyard of the castle struck six; and Moyra started as though she were being watched and summoned back.

"I must go!," she whispered. "And we must behave sensibly, my dear!"

"We shall have months and years to be sensible in," Arthur replied, without loosening his hold. "Whether we like it or not. Now that I've got you . . . Moyra, why did you talk about an 'interval for dreaming'? Did

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you mean that when I woke up . . . ? No, I *won't* let you go! I thought I'd lost you once. Until I can feel sure of you . . ."

"And can't you?" Her own grip tightened; and she strained against him. "Should I be in your arms now if I didn't want you to take me and keep me? Should I have hurried back? If you really want me . . ."

"If I *want* you!"

"I've so little to give!"

"You've too much! That's what frightens me, Moyra. I've nothing!"

A gentle laugh died away in a sigh.

"You're very material! I meant that I wanted you to have something better than a tired body and a bruised heart. I've not asked for anything, have I?, except that you shall help me to find a little happiness. There are difficulties enough before us, beloved, without going to meet them half-way. Dream for a minute that they don't exist!"

"I keep waking up to the madness of it all!"

"Is it a sign of madness to be in love?"

"For you and me, yes! Can you *imagine* what people will say?"

As he became used to the darkness, Arthur could see her faintly shaking her head.

"Every one thought I married Charlie for honour and glory," she answered. "If I didn't mind that, I couldn't mind if any one thought I was marrying for love! But that's so far off that I daren't think of it yet. I've had too many disappointments to trust the future much! If I can feel sure of the present . . . I suppose that's why I'm here now. I wanted something certain to hold on to . . ."

Arthur drew her to him again and kissed her lips.

"You say you always knew that I adored you!" he whispered. "From the first night we met."

"But I wanted to hear it! Yes, I came to make sure you were still here. I had a panic in London! And another when you weren't in your room. I came out quite blindly. Until I heard your voice, I didn't know where I was. And then when you kissed me . . . Now I *must* go!"

When at last she extricated herself from his embrace, the clock at the castle had struck the half hour. Leaving her to return across the park, Arthur came round by road; and they met under the eye of Lady Rhayader in the great hall. The two women were so busy talking in whispers that neither had any attention to spare; and it was only when he moved away towards his own quarters that they seemed to notice him.

"I've just had a telegram to say Charlie's back in England," explained Lady Rhayader. "He's coming down to-morrow . . ."

"But when or how or why . . .," added Moyra. "Pre-eminently *why* . . . Well, if he stays the night he must have another room, that's all," she continued to Lady Rhayader. "I've asked father here to talk about our plans for the holidays and I want him next to me . . ."

"But you couldn't turn your own husband out of his room!," pleaded the older woman.

Moyra threw up her chin with sudden impatience: "Oh, my dear, we must really face facts!," she exclaimed. "It's only a fortnight since he begged me to set him free. In all human probability he's only coming to ask why there's been no answer to his letter, but even if he's thought better of it—which only means that Cynn timer turned him down— . . ."

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"Or that the duke has sent for him," Lady Rhayader put in.

The silence that followed was, to Arthur's thinking, the most eloquent tribute that could be paid to a man now eighty miles out of ear-shot. No one seemed to doubt for an instant that a word from that quarter would bring anybody of either sex or any age hurrying back by the first train.

"Mrs. Leveret is staying somewhere in this part of the world," he announced. "I met her motoring through when I was walking this afternoon."

"Then that's quite enough to explain Charlie's return," said Moyra.

"But you'll see him when he comes?," Lady Rhayader begged. "If you don't drive him into that woman's arms, we can get him back. I know you don't want him, I know he doesn't want to come at present . . ."

"Is a reconciliation worth having on those terms?," asked Arthur. "You must forgive me for butting in, but every one has discussed this business so very frankly . . . Can't you pay *too* high a price for appearances? And that's all it is! The duke as good as told me that he wouldn't mind Knighton's taking a mistress, but he insists that she shall be kept in her place! From *his* point of view, no doubt . . . The family, the good old days . . ."

From force of habit, Lady Rhayader looked nervously round at the door of the audience-chamber, then laid her hand on Arthur's wrist, craning to reach his ear.

"But will nothing make you see that his point of view is all that matters here?," she whispered. "Moyra—you too, perhaps—seems to think *I'm* the person who won't face facts, but it's *you*! Charlie's my son, but I'm not defending him. I hope for a reconciliation because I know

that dreadful woman will make him miserable. I don't suppose the duke cares whether he's miserable or not; but he knows that, if Moyra sets him free, that creature will never let him come back here. And Moyra wouldn't stay here another day. Will you? Of course not! Well, the duke won't allow that. Oh, you may laugh at his feeling about 'family', but it's everything to him. He means to keep his old control at all costs. D'you suppose *I* was consulted how my own child should be brought up? D'you suppose for a moment he intends to let Moyra decide about hers? Oh, he *seems* to give in, but that's only to get them here under his eye. When you understand him better, you'll understand that he doesn't know *how* to give in."

The frantic whisper ceased; and Lady Rhayader stared ahead of her with glazed eyes that seemed to be looking at some ghostly by-play visible only to herself.

"When I tell you he'll forbid a thing," she continued, still staring, "it's no use saying he hasn't the *power* to forbid. He had no power to forbid his own wife . . . The man was her own cousin, but the duke didn't like her talking to him . . . That was forty years ago . . . Fifty . . . More . . . She's not talked to any one since . . ."

The fingers that were clutching Arthur's wrist slowly relaxed. Lady Rhayader passed her hand over her eyes. For a moment her lips moved silently, as though she wanted to ask what she had been saying. Then, leaning giddily on Moyra's arm, she nodded in the direction of the gate-house.

3

Arthur made his way to the schoolroom and tried to force his mind on his work for next day.

In some other life—was it his own, last summer?—he seemed to remember that some one—was it old Gin-Fizz?—had warned him he would have no difficulty with the old duke if he always recollected that he was living in the eighteenth century. It would have been fairer, surely, to say “the middle-ages”. One could read in Browning, almost without a shock, of another duke whose “last duchess” had to be corrected, but she—presumably—was put out of the way swiftly and cleanly, for the honour of a “nine-hundred-years’-old name”, not made a warning to others.

“ ‘*The duke didn’t like her talking to him . . .*’ ”

It would be a comfort to believe that Lady Rhayader had expressed herself with horrible clumsiness, but she seemed to be telling the truth in spite of herself. And the plain meaning of her words . . . Arthur began to pace up and down the room. In one of Conrad’s books a spy had the drums of his ears burst; but in England, Victorian England, within a few yards of where he now was . . .

“ I don’t believe it,” he whispered. “ I won’t . . . ”

Until it was time to dress for dinner, he waited, with one eye on his watch, for a visit from Moyra. Surely she must come to say, at best, that her mother-in-law was raving, at worst that he had better forget what he had just heard if he hoped to sleep that night. “ *How often have I told you,*” she would say, “ *that the duke’s mad?* ”

Remember that and forget everything else . . ." There was not much chance of forgetting! Though he returned to his book and read the text aloud, Arthur could only think of the little duchess as she faltered into the chapel on her daughter-in-law's arm or rose, at her daughter-in-law's prompting, to bow when the duke proposed the health of the ladies. Could *they* forget it? Had the old woman persuaded herself that she was suffering the just punishment of her age-old disobedience? Or had silence and solitude deprived her of the power to think?

And the family? The servants? One or two of them, Arthur calculated, might well have been here all that time ago: what did they think when they heard that their mistress had become deaf in a single night? Did they dare to think? Or did they look upon this ancient of days as a god, who would be justly angered if his acts were questioned? Arthur found that he no longer demanded of himself indignantly why relations and dependents, who were obviously terrorized by the old man, consented to remain under his roof, whispering, pretending and intriguing, instead of doing something drastic and decisive: they were afraid.

He dressed hurriedly with the hope that Moyra might visit him before dinner; he sat up till after midnight on the chance that she might look in on her way to bed; and next day he searched in vain for her on the battlements. Evidently she was resolved that the duke and Lady Rhayader should not again have cause to say that she was behaving indiscreetly!

By the middle of the afternoon he despaired of seeing her and set out for a walk. Passing through the hall, he met Lady Rhayader and was greeted by her as though she had wholly forgotten her outburst of the night before.

With a memorandum-book in one hand and a pile of papers in the other, she was giving orders to the groom of the chambers and only interrupted herself to wave a telegram at Arthur and say that the duke was not returning till next day.

"His cold seems to be rather worse," she explained, "and the doctor at Brampton doesn't want him to motor back at night. There's no cause for alarm, he says."

Arthur murmured his sympathy and passed out into the courtyard. In a mood of queer perversity he regretted that the duke's return was being delayed. With Gillingham and Knighton in the house the heavily charged air would become explosive; and he only wanted to get "things"—whatever they might be—over. What form the outburst would take he could not imagine—presumably Moyra would announce that her father and she were taking the boys abroad and would then leave the old man to find out the next stage for himself—and no one thought fit to tell a mere second what was expected of him.

"At least she's through with Knighton," he comforted himself. "After yesterday . . ."

Half-way down the drive he could see Moyra walking in the direction of the main lodge. She was probably, he imagined, going to meet her father; and, as both boys were with her, there seemed no danger in joining them. A car turned into the drive while he was still twenty yards away; and he saw her pulling out a handkerchief to wave and as quickly returning it to her pocket. Was this her husband? The car swept towards the castle and stopped abruptly; and, as Arthur came alongside, Knighton jumped out and told the driver to go on without him.

"Just going for a walk?," he asked Moyra uneasily.

"You got my telegram? I suppose you wouldn't like to turn back with me? I mean to say, there are one or two things I want to discuss . . . Ah, Camelford! Here, I'm sure Mr. Camelford wouldn't mind taking charge of the boys for a bit. I mean to say, if I could have five minutes before I see my grandfather . . ."

"You won't see him to-day," said Moyra. "He's laid up at Brampton."

"Laid . . . ? Oh, well! It can't be helped. But some one might have told me! I mean to say, I've come over specially . . . Has there been any sort of stamp-shortage here? I mean, I've written to him once and to you more than once. Truth to tell . . ."

So Knighton had not been summoned home by the duke, but had come—like Mrs. Leveret the day before—to find out what Moyra proposed to do.

Without waiting to hear the end of the conversation, Arthur walked ahead with his two charges. Turning out of the drive, with one boy clasping either hand, he splashed furiously along the half-flooded Hereford road until the light began to fail and it was time to return for tea. It would be interesting to know what Knighton and Moyra were saying to each other, what husbands and wives could find to say when they were dissolving partnership. The coward, presumably, did it with a sword; the brave man with a kiss, scorning excuses and recriminations, apologizing and wishing the other good luck. That would be Moyra's line. Would Knighton ask what she meant to do with her freedom?

"I don't suppose he cares," Arthur decided. "He didn't even speak to his own sons . . ."

Conscious that they had maintained an unusually long silence, he asked Moulton whether anything had yet been

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said about the Easter holidays. At once he was told that they were "all" going for a cruise to Greece and Asia Minor.

"Who are 'all'?", Arthur enquired.

"Why, grandpapa and mummie and you and us," the boys replied in chorus.

Their father was not mentioned. Had they been warned that they would see less and less of him? And what did parents find to say when they told their children that the family was dividing, what did they say later when they prepared for the arrival of a new father or mother? What could they say, much later, when their children began to sit in judgement on them? It was not difficult to understand why Moyra had toiled to keep up appearances.

There was no sign of Lord Gillingham, as they retraced their steps; but his car overtook them, as they turned back into the drive, and he leant out to ask if they would like a lift.

"Unless you'd care to stretch your legs, sir?," Arthur suggested. "Lady Knighton started to meet you, but her husband arrived . . ."

Lord Gillingham hesitated for a moment in obvious surprise, then got out of the car and bundled the two boys inside.

"This was unexpected, wasn't it, Camelford?," he asked, as they drove away. "I thought he was abroad."

"Presumably he wants to bring things to a head," Arthur replied. "I can't believe he's come to patch things up. If he has, I'm afraid there's a disappointment in store for him."

Lord Gillingham walked half the length of the drive in silence.

"If he shewed any serious signs of wanting to settle down . . . , " he then began.

"I only hope he won't! I . . . Look here, sir, it's no good making any bones about it, I'm hopelessly in love with Moyra. An odd thing to be telling her father, you may say . . . "

He drew aside as two blinding shafts of light swung in a half-circle at the front of the castle. A horn boomed angrily; and a car raced down the drive as though it were trying to overtake and devour its own head-lamps.

"Some one's in a hurry," was Lord Gillingham's only comment.

"That . . . that was Knighton's car!," Arthur exclaimed. "He's not wasted much time. . . . Well, sir, I had to tell you this. I don't know what you think of me . . . "

The long silence that followed would have been even more unnerving if Arthur had not been familiar with his companion's unreadiness in speech.

"Perhaps I'd better see Moyra before I say anything," Lord Gillingham muttered at last. "These things are not entirely in our own control . . . What you've told me rather complicates the future, but we can talk about that later."

4

They parted in the great hall; and Arthur went to his room with a feeling that Knighton's whirlwind visit had effectually ended what Moyra called the "interval for dreaming" and that his own avowal would shortly bring him face to face with some of life's most unpleasant

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realities. It seemed likely enough that, when next he met Lord Gillingham, he would be told that, whatever else happened, he must fade away before the future became any more "complicated". And, if Moyra had to get on without him for twelve months, she might discover that she could get on without any one, ever.

"Meanwhile, she's not thrown me a word since the scene with Lady Rhayader yesterday!"

Surely she might make time, he grumbled, to say what had happened when she was alone with her husband! And surely, he exclaimed, two hours later, as the lights continued to shine from the windows of the banqueting-hall, they need not keep him waiting half the night while they followed—in the duke's absence!—his unending ritual of taking wine with one another and toasting and bowing! From his seat in the high window-embrasure, Arthur could see lights springing up in the duchess's wing: she, then, had—as usual—retired first and Moyra was presumably conversing stiffly with Lady Rhayader in the long gallery. At another time it would have been diverting to think of Lord Gillingham raising a lonely glass to "Fox-Hunting!" or admonishing himself that the bottle stood, but Arthur could only stare sullenly at the lighted windows and lash himself into a fury of impatience at every one else's calm. At half-past ten he knocked out his pipe as though the sound must be heard and the hint taken; at eleven he told himself with childish rage that he was going to bed.

Not until a quarter past eleven did Lord Gillingham arrive; and his opening words contained only the colourless statement that Moyra wanted to discuss plans for Easter.

"Are you ready?," he asked, as though Arthur had

not already been waiting for an hour and a half. "The position is this. My plans for Egypt have been rather upset; and Moyra's trying to console me with a cruise somewhere. I personally don't mind where I go, so long as it's warm . . ."

"She mentioned the idea," said Arthur. "I can't think, as things are, that she'll want me to come now."

"I'll leave her to answer for herself about that. Will you go on ahead? I must change into a short coat."

The door of the boudoir was standing ajar; and for a moment Arthur fancied that the room was empty. Then he found Moyra curled inside the biggest of the arm-chairs. Her lap was covered with papers; and her manner, as she waved him to a chair at right-angles to her own, seemed discouragingly businesslike.

"I ran away very unceremoniously this afternoon," she apologized, "but Charlie was in such a tearing hurry. . . . I'll tell you about that later. The immediate problem is father, whose blood will unquestionably be on my head if I don't get him into the sun. As I told you, I should like to combine instruction with pleasure if you don't think you'll have had too much of us all. There's a cruise here that includes Venice, Ragusa, Athens, Corinth . . ."

As she hunted among the gaudily illustrated booklets in her lap, Arthur walked to the fire and began to fill his pipe again. Whatever she might tell him "later", there were evidently going to be no confidences to-night; and, if he had not known that she was the last person to be moved by a show of petulance, he would have been tempted to ask if she thought she was treating him fairly. Knighton had been and gone; her father was in the next

room; and the duke, in all probability, would be returning next day. Meanwhile she was behaving as though nothing had changed since they discussed his pontifical mid-term reports on "the geographical factor in history".

"It will be a great experience for Moulton and Eddie," he brought himself to say. "And for me, if I came. I've not travelled at all. I don't know how long you meant to be away . . ."

"That's really decided for us. Here's the timetable."

Arthur tried to interest himself in the sailing and arriving dates of a ship which he was convinced he would never see. It was idle, however, to make objections until he had heard Lord Gillingham's views; and, to judge by the time that he took to change his coat, Lord Gillingham was in no hurry to take part in the discussion. What a life-time had passed since the September night when Moyra first did the honours of this room! And how little the room itself had changed! There was the same parade of silver-framed photographs on the top of the piano—Knighton and the two boys and the brother who had been killed and the brother who had lost a foot—the same bowls of the famous Moulton carnations, the same scarlet-silk hangings. And how little, Arthur added as he caught sight of his reflection in a hanging mirror, either Moyra or he had changed in the last five months! He was the same healthy animal in high condition—tall, big-boned and broad-shouldered—and he could understand no better now than before why any woman should find him in any way attractive. Except that she was thinner in the face, Moyra too was the same. Her white back was unbowed, her deep-set eyes

untroubled by everything that she had endured or was still to endure. Five months ago, in this place and at this hour, he was telling her that there was one insuperable objection—which she might take as a compliment or not—to his settling at Moulton. In spite of that, he had come. Was he now to protest that he could not go abroad with her? And would he, in spite of that, yield a moment after? Small wonder, if that was all his power of resistance, that the duke fancied he had only to throw them together . . .

There would be a strange home-coming, by the way, for the old man; but, for all Lady Rhayader's forebodings, there was nothing that he could do. If only Moyra would say what stage they had reached!

"This all sounds too wonderful," said Arthur, as she looked up for his answer.

"Here's the plan of the ship . . . Oh, that miserable door!," she exclaimed impatiently, as a gust of wind flicked the paper out of her hand.

Arthur bent to pick it up, then started back so abruptly that he knocked his head against the great carved over-mantel. In the middle of the doorway, silent and motionless in the shadows, stood the duke. He was dressed in the square-tailed coat and strapped trousers which he had worn for his expedition to Brampton, with a folded shawl draped loosely over his open collar and stock. The upstanding white hair was disordered, as though he had that moment snatched off his hat; and he leant forward, with both hands resting—chin-high—on the knob of his long ebony cane, like a man in the last extremity of weakness. For a moment, still dizzy from the blow to his head, Arthur could not believe his own eyes and waited to see the shadowy wraith vanish as

silently as it had come. Then the little old man lifted his stick and pointed it, over one shoulder, at the door, as though he were going away again.

"Is it too late for 'ee to spare me five minutes, Camelford?," he asked. "I called on 'ee in your own quarters. Maybe if I'd looked here first . . ."

"Whenever you like, sir," Arthur replied. "If Lady Knighton will excuse us . . ."

For the first time the duke seemed to become conscious that there was some one in the big chair beside the fire.

"I've nothing to say that she can't most profitably hear. I had an idea ye weren't expecting her so soon. Well, well, well, well, well . . ."

Forcing himself to the door, Arthur shut it and extended a tentative arm to the duke.

"I . . . I thought you were at Brampton, sir!," he stammered. "Lady Rhayader told me that your chill . . ."

The old man nodded without shifting his position, as though to intimate that this was what he had intended people to think and that he now intended them to think something different.

"Nay, nay! It was a trifle," he answered smoothly. "I felt better when I'd had some dinner . . . I'm not disturbing 'ee, I hope? "

The bland words were belied by the sharpness of tone. So, Arthur surmised, Royalty might speak to a subject who remained seated in its presence. He looked over his shoulder in the hope that Moyra would carry off this meeting with greater composure than he had himself shewn. To his surprise, she was sitting bent over her papers as though she had not heard the old man's question; and, when she turned her head at the sound of

shuffling feet, it was only to nod towards a chair before returning to her work.

"Will ye not say good-evening, Moyra my dear?," the duke piped.

"I didn't hear you knock." In sharpness, Arthur felt, he had met his match. This was the tone Moyra would have used in reprimanding a housemaid for coming into the room without her apron. "You always do, for some reason."

"I apologize if I startled 'ee."

"Oh, I was expecting you. So it wasn't so serious as we were led to think?"

Though her lips were parted in a smile, her eyes sparkled with defiance; and, for all her assurance, the hand that tidied her papers trembled.

"I said in my telegram that it was *nothing* serious," the duke corrected her. Then he turned to Arthur: "As I've run 'ee to earth at last . . . It was foolish of me not to look here first . . ."

At the reiterated taunt Arthur squared his shoulders with a sense of unexpected exhilaration. Moyra's courage—or should it be called insolence?—was infectious, though the old man was in a formidable mood. As he stood with head craning forward, he was like an angry cat sniffing after an alien that had invaded his private corner.

"Lord Gillingham brought me up here after dinner. We had to settle about the holidays . . ."

The duke came a pace farther into the room, cupping one ear as though he had not heard.

"Gillingham, did ye say?," he demanded.

"He motored down before dinner," answered Moyra. "Didn't any of the servants tell you?"

"I've not seen any." A sound in the adjoining room

made him look away to the door. "What's he doing in Charlie's room?"

"Changing into a jacket, I believe." So, Arthur fancied, Moyra would have looked and spoken if a housemaid had criticized an order. "I thought it would be nice to have him near," she added. "Ah, here he is!"

Though Arthur could hear the door opening, he found that he had turned instinctively and was watching the duke. There could no longer be any doubt that Moyra had stage-managed this encounter; and, if she had not timed her father's entrance for the moment when it would be dramatically most effective, she had foreseen every move in the old man's game from the moment when she returned a day earlier than she was expected, in the certainty that her arrival would be known or guessed at Brampton within an hour. It was not difficult to understand now why she had remained aloof all day, disdaining accomplices, nor why she had waited until the duchess and Lady Rhayader had gone to bed before opening the door of the trap. And the duke had blundered into it! And he knew, from the moment when he found his expected culprits talking prosaically on either side of the fire, that he had blundered!

It was a difficult position to retrieve; but he was succeeding, to some extent, by his old device of not seeing or hearing anything that he found inconvenient to see or hear.

"I'm sorry I was not back to welcome 'ee," he told Lord Gillingham in an obvious effort to gain time. "I thought ye were abroad. Indeed, unless I'm much mistaken, I was told that Moyra had been seeing 'ee off to Paris."

"I was called back," Lord Gillingham answered. "This is rather a painful meeting, I'm afraid. I don't know how much you've been told . . ."

"Charlie wants me to divorce him," Moyra supplemented.

The old man turned on her with an expression of amazement that made Arthur wonder for a moment whether he had understood or even read the letter which he had so artfully abstracted.

"He wants 'ee . . . ?"

"You know that already," Moyra interrupted impatiently.

The ebony cane beat a brief, menacing tattoo on the stone floor.

"Whatever I know or don't know, ye must excuse me from discussing family affairs in the presence of a stranger." Shuffling forward, he stirred contemptuously among Moyra's scattered papers. "What's all this? Eh? Are ye going a voyage?"

"We were talking about it," Moyra answered. "There's really no need to be mealy-mouthed! Mr. Camelford knows the whole story . . ."

"Oh, I'm sure ye've no secrets from him!"

"So, if you want to discuss *that*, you can go ahead. If it's anything else, you've said it will do me no harm to hear it. All I ask is that, as I *must* decide about the Easter holidays . . . Is there anything you *really* want to say? If not . . ."

Arthur studied the old man's face as he was invited, probably for the first time in his long life, to leave a room. It was too much to hope that he would shew any sign of shame, but he seemed most reluctant to admit even temporary defeat. And yet he must be aware that they

all knew the meaning of his presence and that, instead of discovering two lovers locked in an adulterous embrace, he had now to face the disappointment of finding his grandson's wife smoking a cigarette and talking business with her sons' tutor, who was smoking a pipe and waiting for her father to join the council. He must know that they had seen through his so innocent invitation to Brampton, as afterwards they saw through his deceptive telegram. Next time he would need to be a little more clever, or at least to credit them with rather more cleverness, unless he came to see that there would be no "next time".

"It will be soon enough to renew this conversation when Knighton's here to speak for himself," said the old man.

"But he's said all he has to say!," rejoined Moyra. "This afternoon." She waited for the last and deadliest of her shafts to strike home, then stood up to look at the clock as though she must leave the duke if the duke still declined to leave her. "He paid me a flying visit and threshed the whole thing out. We can't keep up the farce of our happy married life if he's going to bolt with another woman; and the less scandal the better, for the boys' sake. I hope he's going to behave discreetly; he was most reasonable to-day. And that's really all there is to say on the subject. He goes abroad to-morrow. I'm afraid you can't stop him! And you must have seen to-night that nothing and nobody is going to stop me!"

Looking from Moyra to her father and then to Arthur, the duke drew out his watch and turned to the door.

"Ye seem to have everything cut and dried," he observed ironically. Then, as though he had slept through the last ten minutes and his own latest words, he informed Arthur again that there was something which he had been meaning for some time to mention. "I called on 'ee on my way here. . . . It's getting late now . . ."

"I'm free any time you like to-morrow, sir, after half-past twelve," Arthur replied.

"Before ye came here, I told 'ee to put your attorney in touch with mine. It seems nothing has been done. These things must be established on a proper business footing; and ye must permit me to say it was for you to remind me. Well, well, well!" The old man's voice lost its note of reproof. "My man of affairs will be here to-morrow . . ."

"But I understood, sir, that all arrangements of this kind were to be made with Lady Knighton."

"Then forgive me for saying ye understood wrong! I shall expect 'ee after luncheon. In the justice-room. Any of the men will shew 'ee the way. A proper business footing! If ye don't know how to look after yourself, I must look after 'ee. Good-night, Camelford! Good-night, my little granddaughter! And good-night to 'ee, my lord."

Arthur flung open the door and stood with his hand on the latch until the duke's shuffling steps had died out of hearing. A receding murmur of "Good-night to 'ee," "Good-night, your grace" marked his progress along the corridor. Then silence crept back into the castle; and Lord Gillingham, with his arm round Moyra's waist, led her to her room. The door to the staircase was still open—and the candles guttering in consequence—but Arthur knew that, if he shut it, he would at once want to see

if the duke was peeping or listening outside. The old man had not done with them, nor they with him.

"When he's a night's rest and a tame solicitor to the good . . ."

The door of Moyra's room opened and shut; and Lord Gillingham returned with an air of unreal calm.

"Moyra's charged me with a message for you," he announced. "If you're seeing the duke to-morrow, she insists that she and I must be present too."

"I shall be only too glad of your support. What he can do is not very clear . . ."

"Moyra thinks he'll try to buy you over. All this talk about 'business footings' . . . And he'll try to buy her over too, by giving her Leominster House if she'll hold her hand about Knighton. I suppose I oughtn't to say it, but what he can't get by bullying he usually tries to get by bribing . . ."

"And when that fails?"

"God knows! You must be very circumspect, Camelford, for a very long time. Those letters . . ."

"I don't believe, sir, that, by themselves, they'd cut any ice in court."

"You may be quite sure they wouldn't stand alone! You saw that to-night. The duke's given up all hope of stopping a divorce, but he's working to put Moyra in the wrong so that Knighton can divorce her. He won't succeed, but there's not much he'd stick at. If you didn't know it before, that's the explanation of his antics to-night. And the next thing . . . He can't very well brick Moyra up in a wall, but he doesn't mean to let go of those boys . . . And, the more you see of him, the less you feel justified in saying he 'can't very well' do . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

THE LAST ROUND

I

For the first time since childhood, Arthur passed that night with his door locked and a light burning. At intervals, when one candle had to be replaced by another, he examined his own feelings to define what it was that he feared or anticipated. The idea of any personal attack was fantastic. He was well used by now to the quiet that lay over the castle like a suffocating cloth, from midnight till dawn; well used to the solitude of his distant tower; almost well used to an occasional bout of complete sleeplessness. Strictly speaking, as he anticipated nothing, there was nothing to fear. Or should one say, speaking more strictly still, that, the less he knew what to expect, the more room there was for extravagant fear of all kinds? In establishing any reign of terror, the first thing was to create a belief that some disaster was imminent; the next was to keep it uncertain, in form, time and incidence. To a greater or lesser degree, all autocrats had their atmosphere of terror ready-made; but, when their authority was flouted and they still contrived to keep their little worlds trembling at their nod, the secret of their power was rooted in something more substantial than the irrational fears of their victims. For the hundredth time Arthur repeated angrily: "There's nothing the old devil

can *do* "; but he did not unlock his door till he heard the first sound of opening shutters.

"Say a thing often enough and you'll come to believe it," he muttered, as he blew out the last of his candles.

He was himself coming to believe Moyra's reiterated warning that in certain respects the duke was not sane. He would believe it without qualification if he did not sometimes doubt the sanity of those who testified to it. Lady Rhayader, for example! If her ghastly hint about the duchess was to be given its only possible meaning, the Duke of Leominster should now be confined at Broadmoor; if it was a delusion born of her own diseased fancies, she should herself be in Bedlam. And Moyra, who made no comment on the tale or the telling? And himself, who was afraid to ask for one? Once admit insanity and they admitted a fourth dimension. "Possible" and "impossible" lost their old denotation. "Insanity" itself became a dangerous word to use when one could not decide whether to say "*Only a madman would behave like that*" or "*Only a madman would believe that any one could behave like that.*"

Certainly there were no signs of madness about the old man when he began to make his presence felt at the end of breakfast. A note, in his own precise handwriting, reminded Arthur that he was expected in the justice-room after luncheon; and the secretary who brought it—a small and furtive figure, hitherto only glimpsed distantly in the chapel—invited attention to certain correspondence, dating from the previous November, which had apparently been shelved. Would Mr. Camelford be kind enough to inform the bearer what decision, if any, had been reached?

The tone of the message and the agitation of the messenger suggested that the duke was an impatient task-

master. Arthur made haste to slit open the sealed envelope presented to him and drew out a file of papers with a letter in his own handwriting on top. As the secretary's eyes were upon him, he could only hope that he betrayed no surprise. To expect the unexpected was a contradiction in terms; but this, in spite of his hint overnight, was the unlikeliest line of attack for the old man to follow! The note—addressed to Knighton—accompanied a memorandum—on Brampton note-paper—discussing the project—now almost forgotten—of finding a house in the neighbourhood of the castle where the nucleus of a school could be established, then or later. “*Believing as I do,*” Arthur read, “*that boys learn best in the company of other boys and in competition with them . . .*” At the end of the memorandum was a red-ink note: “*The Duke of Leominster. What do you think of this? K.*” Under the red-ink note was a pencil scrawl: “*Mr. Camelford. I have not seen or heard anything of this before. Will you please tell me what stage has been reached? Leominster.*”

The flavour of bureaucracy seemed faintly incongruous for a man who lost no opportunity of reviling the red-tape methods of Whitehall jacks-in-office, but Arthur presumed that it must gratify the duke's love of detail and passion for power.

“Nothing has been done since this memorandum was drawn up,” he told the waiting secretary. “I took it for granted that the idea was turned down . . .”

He looked up in the hope of hearing why the question was being reopened, but the secretary was already making for the door and he could only think that the duke had decided to retrieve his defeat of the night before by pretending that he had forgotten about it. His “little

granddaughter's " wild talk of divorce had to be treated as an outburst of childish temper. Everything was to go on as before. There was no need to bribe, still less to threaten. Against Knighton and Mrs. Leveret, on the one side, and against Moyra, on the other, stood an impregnable and imponderable mass of assumption; and the fact that one man had given orders for all his life and that others had always obeyed them was harder to resist than if he had tried to assert his authority at the point of a pistol. Though he owed no allegiance to the duke, Arthur felt that he was being ordered—" in the King's name "—to return to his post.

The bell above the chapel was beginning to ring; and the sound put him in mind of another mutiny in which he had assisted some five-and-twenty years earlier. Through the garden dividing his father's rectory from the church the chimes were dying away, the five-minute " hurry " bell was beginning; and in the play-room the rector's five children were collected for a long-prepared strike against week-day services in the holidays. " Lent or no Lent," Arthur could hear his brother Horace valiantly declaring. And then their mother had appeared, calling briskly: " Now, darlings! Your hats and coats! " The ring-leader's speech progressed no farther than: " Look here, mother . . . "; and after a quarter of a century the old, amazed horror was still audible in Mrs. Camelford's voice, as she exclaimed: " Why, good gracious, you've not put your boots on yet! Up you go this *minute!* " It was at this moment, though his presence was superfluous, that the canon arrived, watch in hand, to say: " All ready? You're cutting things fine, young people! " And so the mutiny flickered out, in silence and ignominy. It was five against two; but the two were made irresistible by

custom, by the habit of authority and, most of all, by the assumption that they were going to be obeyed.

Arthur roused at the chiming of the clock in the courtyard and went downstairs to the schoolroom. Nine-tenths of all human activities were governed by the assumption that to-day was to be like yesterday: there were not enough troops in all England to coerce a single shire if the butchers and bakers and cooks and housemaids went on strike. And it was not very surprising if a man whose authority had never been challenged should assume that it never would be. To grapple successfully with the duke one must try to put oneself in his place; and, to his hearing, Moyra's late outburst was no more than a fit of ungovernable hysteria, the more discreditable for being exhibited in the presence of a stranger.

And yet in two hours' time Knighton would be on the way to Dover. In that one most unlikely quarter the life-long habit of obedience had at last broken down; and, if the duke hoped to keep the mutiny from spreading, he must strike before Moyra could escape to London. It was more than likely, Arthur felt, that he would find a note on his desk to say that she had taken the boys away; but she was evidently standing her ground until the attack was reopened and, when she came for them at the end of a morning that passed with unwelcome rapidity, her only comment was that the English never knew when they were beaten.

"One of their most tiresome characteristics, I always think," she added.

As he lunched hurriedly by himself, Arthur tried to read *The Times*, but his mind was obsessed by thoughts of the coming interview. Only once before had he been inside that grim, half-subterranean chamber where the duke

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transacted business and where his predecessors had meted rough justice through the ages to rebels, prisoners, schismatics and common vagrants. Now the walls were hung with maps, the cells adjoining had been converted into strong-rooms; but something more than modern dress and office furniture was required to drive out the spirit of the middle ages. Here or hereabouts, men had been tortured; in the peaceful yard outside they had been mutilated and executed.

The door had been left ajar to light the passage under the banqueting-hall; and, as he overtook Moyra and her father at the bottom of the stairs, Arthur saw the duke sitting bent over a table covered with papers. His shoulders were once more wrapped in a shawl, but there was no trace of invalidity in his manner as he complimented them on their punctuality and explained that his "man of affairs" had not yet arrived.

"I really don't think it's necessary to bring him in," said Moyra. "This is a matter between Mr. Camelford and myself. If *he* wants a proper legal agreement at this rather late hour of the day, his solicitors and mine . . ."

"But so long as ye're all living under my roof," the duke interrupted testily, "I have a right to know what arrangements ye see fit to make. I learn to-day for the first time that there's been some correspondence about a *school*. I understand that nothing has been done; is it anybody's wish that anything *should* be done? I know to my cost that women have a soul above business; but, if a house is to be provided, we must consider the size and kind of house." Fumbling among his papers, the old man unearthed the file which he had sent to Arthur's room earlier in the day. "Ye say this memorandum of yours, Camelford, has never been answered?"

"I discussed it with Lady Knighton," Arthur replied. "We felt that the time was hardly ripe."

"And do ye feel it's any riper now?"

"I think Lady Knighton's the best person to answer that, sir."

"And with all possible respect to 'ee both," the duke returned, "I say she's not. In my grandson's absence and while ye're all under my roof . . ."

"But, as I thought I made quite clear last night," Moyra struck in, "it's only a question of hours or days before I leave your roof."

The duke raised his eyebrows slightly and stretched a hand to the bell. When his secretary came, he asked to be informed at once when Mr. Blatchford arrived.

"Last night, my dear," he then told Moyra, "ye said many things which I think we'd better agree to forget. I admit ye spoke under what ye would no doubt consider strong provocation; but, if it's worth while to disinter what's over and done with, I could prove to 'ee there've been faults on both sides. If ye'd ever shewn the faintest understanding of what young men of spirit are like . . . Ye took a grave risk in locking your door against your husband . . . However, this is not a subject that I care to discuss *coram populo*. Ye were not yourself last night . . ." At a gesture of impatience from Moyra, his expression lost its bland indulgence. "Or, if ye were," he snapped, "it's high time to end this nonsense. I desire to hear no more talk about divorce."

"And you may be sure I don't want to discuss it with you," she retorted. "This is entirely a matter between Charlie and myself."

As she swept to the door, Arthur prepared to follow her, but the duke rapped irritably on the table and begged him to wait until their business was settled.

"Ye wish me to understand that nothing's to be done about this scheme of yours?," he asked, as though he had disposed at last of a tiresome interruption. "Now the next point—and do me the favour of curbing your impatience, Moyra—: something was said last night about your going abroad at Easter. I did not gather who was included . . ."

Lord Gillingham took a step forward from the hearth where he had been standing, watchful and silent, ever since he came into the room.

"I'm making myself responsible for all the arrangements," he volunteered.

"And, at the cost of giving a lesson in common courtesy to a man who should be old enough not to need it," the duke shrilled, "I must remind 'ee, my lord, that certain obligations are owed to the people whom ye honour by accepting their hospitality. Moulton Castle is not a tavern where ye can come and go without a word to your humble host. I have a right to know when ye start, who's going. It will be Moyra and her boys? Good, good, good! And yourself?"

"I hope Camelford too."

Arthur braced himself for the attack which it was now his turn to receive. Though the duke was one against three, he had so far succeeded in keeping his adversaries from uniting; he had made Moyra lose her temper; and he had brought a flush to Lord Gillingham's pale cheeks.

"But that is not yet decided?," the old man asked. "Perhaps some one will shew the consideration to let me know when your plans are completed. I must be allowed to speak plainly on one point," he continued, turning to Arthur. "If ye do go, ye must comport yourself more circumspectly than ye've done here. I know well that the wonderful, enlightened generation which ye young people adorn has claimed a freedom of behaviour that was not allowed when I was your age. Ye would be offended if I said it seemed to take its manners from a bear-garden and its morals from a farm-yard, but I wish to make it clear that there are still houses where a different tradition prevails. Whether it's here or abroad, young man, ye will kindly remember that Lady Knighton is my grandson's wife. The fact that he has not been here . . ."

He paused and looked up interrogatively as Moyra came back into the room and whispered something to her father.

"If you want to bring a charge," she challenged the duke, "make it quite definite! I'm sure Arthur would prefer that to vague phrases about not behaving 'circumspectly' . . ."

"'Arthur'?," repeated the duke. "I don't think I know . . ."

"That is Mr. Camelford's Christian name," Moyra explained tartly. "It's part of the make-believe—yes, we've all caught it!—to pretend that I don't *always* call him Arthur or that he doesn't *always* call me Moyra. It's part of the make-believe for you to pretend you're surprised. If you remember the language of our letters . . ."

"If ye want it unvarnished," the old man broke in

before she could elaborate her attack, "I charge 'ee *both* with forgetting the positions ye occupy. Mr. Camelford is engaged to teach your two boys and not to make love to their mother . . ."

"Then you had *no* right," interrupted Moyra, "to be so bitterly disappointed last night when you sneaked back and found him quietly talking business with me! You've been hoping and praying for the last three months that he *would* make love to me! It would have taken my attention off Charlie! And, if you could have caught us tripping, there would very soon have been more talk of divorces! You'd have told Charlie to divorce me so that you could get hold of Moulton and Eddie once and for all. . . . When you sent him those letters . . ."

Under the first outpouring of Moyra's pent fury the duke had sat silent and almost still, only glancing from time to time at her father as though to ask whether he could not stem this torrent of bitterness. As she stumbled under the rush of her own words, he drummed impatiently on the arm of his chair and turned to look at the clock over the door.

"That's the second time ye've referred to 'letters'," he observed. "They seem to be causing 'ee some uneasiness. If ye would have the goodness to tell me what they *are* . . . Assuming they have any connection with the matter in hand," he added wearily.

"I'm referring to the letters you stole and sent to Charlie," Moyra answered promptly. "Just before you warned my mother-in-law to keep an eye on us. Oh, I'm sick of this!"

As she turned to the door for the second time, Arthur studied the duke's impassive face with admiration that would not be denied. There was something to be said

for the nickname by which he had been known for most of his life. Had Moyra's taunts been directed at a cast-iron gate-post, she could hardly have been rewarded with less response; and she was beginning to hurt herself without leaving a mark on him.

"Is there anything more you want to say to me, sir?," he asked in the hope of creating a diversion.

The duke continued to drum on the chair as though he had not heard the question.

"And now, perhaps," he observed at large, "ye'll admit that all this indignation is a little out of place. I had not intended to mention these letters. They were brought to my notice by some one who felt bound in common loyalty to give me warning of what was going on. I gave 'ee a hint, which seems to have been misunderstood. I told Knighton frankly that, while I did not pretend to understand the code that obtains among you young people, he was allowing his wife to behave in a way that I should not have permitted with mine. I can't expect temperate opinions while ye're in your present mood, Moyra, but I must be allowed to say: 'Judge not that ye be not judged.' If these letters which are causing 'ee so much anxiety had passed between Knighton and this woman of his, ye'd have put a very uncharitable construction on their relations. Ye may think yourselves fortunate that Knighton's more tolerant or less suspicious. But I warn 'ee not to exhaust his patience. If *I* were in his place . . . That's all I have to say. And, as I hope the subject will not have to be discussed again, I'll only add this, Moyra: don't let me ever hear the word 'divorce' on your lips again. It's unseemly; and it's foolish."

With a vague gesture of dismissal, the old man tidied his papers and stood up. He seemed as little elated at the

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end as he had been embarrassed at the beginning. Always controlling his temper, always biding his time, he only heard what suited him and returned indefatigably to a single point. Any other man would have been put out of countenance by the charge of stealing private letters; but to the duke this was irrelevant. What he wished to have well understood was that everything would go on as before.

As they stood, each waiting for the other to speak, Arthur wondered how many times a similar scene had been enacted in that room. The duchess and Lady Rhayader in their generations, Rhayader and Knighton in theirs had presumably been brought here to have their spirits broken. At the end of the scene they had doubtless lingered like this, subdued and helpless, their lesson learnt.

The silence was broken by Moyra, who slipped her arm through her father's and murmured that it was time to take the boys for their walk.

"If Mr. Blatchford wants to see me," she told the duke, "I shall be back for tea."

"If ye insist on keeping everything in your own hands," replied the old man, "there's nothing to discuss. I think ye'll regret this obstinacy later. Ye know well that I undertook to pay for your sons' education. It was never contemplated that the allowance I make 'ee should cover that."

"And you know well that wasn't what I meant. I presume Mr. Blatchford will be acting for Charlie and I wanted to warn him that he'll be hearing from my solicitors in a few days."

"I'll send him up to 'ee. Perhaps ye'll believe him, even if ye won't believe me. Knighton will get over this infatuation; and it's your business, my dear, to help him.

Ye couldn't do what ye threaten; and, if ye were foolish enough to try, ye'd regret it to the end of your days. Ye must be without sin yourself before ye begin to cast stones; and, though I charge 'ee with nothing worse than folly, I'll have 'ee branded an adulteress and turned adrift in your shame if ye try any tricks. By your way of going on in these last months, ye've put yourself in my power."

Moyra looked at her watch and shrugged her shoulders in despair of making the old man listen to what he did not choose to hear.

"Perhaps Mr. Blatchford will believe me if you won't," she murmured. "Can't you understand that Charlie's *asked* me to set him free? That I have the proofs? That I've said I will? He behaved very well, when it came to the point. I don't think he was taken in at all by the mischief that you've been trying to make here; but, if he thought I was Arthur's mistress a dozen times over, he saw that he couldn't decently turn round on me after all I've had to bear from him. As a matter of fact, I'm not anybody's mistress and I shall take very good care for the next twelve months that nobody thinks I am. If I stayed here another week, you'd make some of your miserable servants perjure themselves. So I'm going; and I shan't come back. If any one saw those most foolish letters, he might make a case out of them, but nobody ever will. Charlie gave them back to me last night. I burnt them. . . . And that's all *I* have to say!"

3

Arthur's last view of the old duke was the one which, even at the time, he felt would remain in his memory long after

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he had forgotten their ceremonial first meeting or their subsequent encounters in the rose-garden or the post-prandial sessions at the semi-circular table in the room next to the banqueting-hall. Familiarity had to some extent dulled his perceptions; but he was in no danger of being unable to recall, even on a remote death-bed, the lineaments and expression which the old man had worn when he, who had for a lifetime won his own way unchecked, was invited to admit unqualified defeat by a rebel of his own household.

Standing by the fire in his sitting-room and filling a pipe with fingers that trembled, Arthur found that he could not clearly recollect how he had contrived to escape. A footman had come in to announce Mr. Blatchford's arrival; Moyra or Lord Gillingham had made for the door; and then they had all three stood guiltily telling one another that there was nothing more to be said, until their nervous chattering was drowned by the duke's silence. Whatever they felt of elation or fear was in some way dwarfed by the voiceless and implacable determination of a man who now had no other weapon than his own grim power of will. There had been no attempt to trump Moyra's insolently flung down ace; but the old man seemed to be saying: "*I am afraid there is a surprise for you when you come to add up the score.*" Arthur looked contemptuously at his own unsteady hands. One of them would have been enough to break every brittle bone in that shrunken bouy; but the old man had cowed them, as at different times he had cowed his wife and his son and his son's wife and his grandson. Would he, at this fifty-ninth minute of the eleventh hour, succeed in cowing his grandson's wife?

A clock struck three; and simultaneously there arose

a babble of eager voices from the garden as Moyra set out with her boys. Of all times, Arthur felt, this was the least appropriate for accompanying her; and he contented himself with a moody prowl on the battlements until he saw them returning for tea. If she held to her threat of leaving immediately, he presumed that he would leave too; and they must decide at once whether it was safe for him to accompany her abroad or even to be in the same house with her until the duke was deprived of power to avenge himself.

From the window commanding her tower he watched till the lamps were lighted, then made his way to her boudoir. The drawers of her writing-table, he observed, were open and empty; the bookcases had been stripped; and the hearth was piled with crumpled paper and charred boxes. She was engaged in an apparently one-sided conversation with the duke's "man of affairs", who seemed to be exhausting his ingenuity in making offers which were rejected almost before they could be explained. "It's no good," Arthur heard above the rip of torn letters. "Really, it's too late for all this sort of thing. . . . No. . . . No. . . . Quite impossible, I'm afraid." She looked pointedly at the clock, as the door opened, and dropped wearily into an arm-chair as the solicitor prepared to renew his entreaties by asking whether he might continue to speak in the presence of a third party.

"You can say what you like before Mr. Camelford," she told him, "but you're only wasting your valuable time."

"I shan't consider it wasted if I can persuade you not to do anything in a hurry," Mr. Blatchford replied. "And I'm sure that Mr. Camelford and every one who has your true interests at heart will share that view."

The honeyed voice seemed out of keeping with the blustering, almost brutal appearance of the speaker. Mr. Blatchford imposing terms was likely to be a vastly more ruthless person than Mr. Blatchford making the best of a lost cause. Arthur was conscious of malicious pleasure in watching the bully being bullied: there would have been no mercy in the now appealing red-rimmed eyes or on the now smiling heavy lips if Moyra and he had come to hear the duke's sentence. Though he had never seen the man before, he felt that his enfeebled employer had probably marked him down for his capacity of brow-beating.

"Have you any idea how long I've been married?," Moyra demanded, as the solicitor allowed his eyes to rest on the framed photographs that still adorned the piano. "Or how often I *could* have done what I'm doing now? Please don't talk about doing things in a hurry! And don't remind me that my husband is heir to a dukedom. And don't ask if I've thought about my children. You may take it that I have."

Mr. Blatchford wavered as one weapon after another was snatched from him.

"The duke would be the first to admit that your married life has not been altogether happy," he ventured.

"He was certainly the first to suggest that it was in any way my fault! I don't know whether he's still saying that. . . I can hardly think he's still sitting like a god, saying '*This Shall Not Be* '!"

"He is anxious, above all things, that you should not do anything to burn your boats . . ."

"But what he won't see—what I'm afraid you won't see either, Mr. Blatchford—is that he can't stop me. He's tried bribes, he's tried bullying, he's tried to make

my husband divorce me and he's tried to keep me from divorcing him. We needn't pretend he got you here to settle any kind of business with Mr. Camelford. It was to begin proceedings against me. He's been working up to this for weeks and he hoped to have his evidence ready for you last night. Well, he's failed."

After a long silence Mr. Blatchford rose slowly to his feet:

"And I am to tell him . . . ?"

Moyra's fingers ran through her hair as though she would have liked to tear it out.

"If he's expecting any message from me, you can take him one," she answered between her teeth. "Let him accept his beating in good part; and there'll be very little talk. Let him try any more tricks; and the whole world shall know the tricks he's played already and the way they've all recoiled on him!"

Mr. Blatchford shook his head mournfully as though even he were convinced at last that Moyra was not to be shaken.

"I will tell him that my arguments have been unsuccessful," he answered. "I'm sorry . . . May I say one thing more, Lady Knighton? The duke is a very old man. If you waited a little while . . ."

"Like Lady Rhayader?"

"There has never been a divorce in the family before. If you held your hand for only a few months—he's breaking up visibly!—, he could go to his grave . . ."

"With the certainty that the evil he had done would live after him? It's not the honour of his family that's troubling him, Mr. Blatchford. It's the utter, utter collapse of all he's schemed for. My husband . . . He's broken away from here for ever. His children will be

handed over for me to bring up where I please and how I please. The duke will have no say in the matter, he won't see them." She paused and turned to the fire. "He can't face that at present," she continued, half to herself. "An imbecile to succeed him. And then Charlie and this woman he's picked out of the gutter. And then *my* son. Even that's not the worst, because I shall be here still! When he dies, I shall be the only person who counts in this place." She swung round so abruptly that the solicitor fell back a pace. "And he thought he was getting rid of me so cleverly! The only thing to do as I wouldn't come into line with the rest. And now that's failed too. Oh, I don't wonder he sends you to play for time, Mr. Blatchford, but I can't allow him any time. And he needn't try to see me again. I know it's unpleasant for him, but he's beaten, beaten, beaten, for the first time in his life! If it kills him, he can at least try to die more decently than he's lived."

She broke off and stared dizzily at the fire while Mr. Blatchford, with a sigh and a shrug, bowed himself out.

4

No one had thought to call for lights; and Arthur was able to give Moyra some few moments to compose herself while he drew the curtains and walked round the room, taper in hand. After their experience of the night before, it would never do for the duke to find them whispering in the dark, though they need not expect or fear a visit from him at present. A car was standing in the courtyard, doubtless waiting to take Mr. Blatchford home; and it seemed likely that his present interview in the justice-room would be a protracted one.

"I can't say I envy the 'man of affairs' his job," said Moyra with a grim smile. "When people simply won't take 'no' for an answer . . . Did you want to see me about anything particular?"

"Any time will do! You've earned a little peace now . . ."

"But that doesn't mean you're to go! I'm not nervous as a rule, but I shan't feel safe or happy till I'm out of this place. I don't care about going down to history as a second Amy Robsart; but, if you find me at the bottom of the stairs with my neck broken, you'll know who pushed me down."

The lights in the courtyard swung in a slow half-circle and leapt out at the darkness as the car turned into the drive. The interview had been a short one, after all; and, as Arthur came away from the window, he could have wished that it had been longer if so the duke had been kept out of mischief until they were ready for him.

"I don't think we need put murder among his possible crimes," he suggested.

"You would if you knew him as I do," replied Moyra. "If he could get me out of the way . . . I don't believe *you* understand what a smash-up this is for him. He really has nothing to live for now. In his place . . ."

As she paused, Arthur repeated:

"In his place?"

"I don't know! I can't think he'll survive the shock. That makes me sorry I said what I did about hoping he'd at least die decently. If he doesn't die, he might well go absolutely berserk. Did you ever hear of the Tarnley case? There was a law-suit about some pictures that the duchess ought to have inherited. She lost, but the pictures were ruined before he would give them up. And

that's typical. If he can't get a thing for himself, no one else is going to have it . . ."

She broke off and sat upright, gripping the arms of her chair, at the sound of footsteps on the stone stairs. Then, with a laugh at her own weakness, she relaxed at the reassuring sound of her father's voice asking if he might come in.

"I thought the old man might have returned to the attack," he explained.

"He's been sending ambassadors," answered Moyra, "but he *must* see now that it does no good. Did Mr. Blatchford tackle you too?"

"No, he was looking for the duke to say good-bye and that furtive little secretary-creature advised him to try up here. I thought I'd drift along to see if I could be any use. So you've begun your packing? I'd better tell my man to be ready first thing to-morrow. I don't think you'd better come with us, Camelford. On the other hand, I don't want to leave you alone on the stricken field . . ."

"I can always go to my people at Leamington," said Arthur.

It was strange to think that this was probably the last night he would spend at Moulton, at least in the lifetime of its present owner; and it was stranger still to think of the trifling accidents that had brought him here. If Moyra had remained at Stourgrove that week-end when he dropped in fortuitously to play cricket, if Dr. Irving had insisted on keeping him at Brampton, if Knighton had been a little more impatient with his enchantress, they would never have met, or they would have met only to part. And, for all he knew, Moyra would have assumed control of the castle when next he came here.

Unless she changed her mind, he might be helping her to entertain and to manage the place. That reflection must be galling to the old gentleman who had so lately reminded him that he was engaged to teach Lady Knighton's sons and not to make love to their mother.

"I think that would perhaps be best," Moyra began. Then she put a finger to his lips and listened as another hand explored in the dark for the latch of the door. "Come in!", she called out.

This time it was Lady Rhayader, apologetic and breathless, introducing herself with almost the same words that Lord Gillingham had used:

"I thought the duke might be here . . ."

"You're the second person . . . Did he *say* he was coming here?," asked Moyra.

"No, no! It's only that we can't find him and Dr. Swinburne has been waiting half-an-hour. I've looked everywhere else; and it just occurred to me . . ." For the first time her eyes took in the unwonted disorder of the room; and her head drooped. "But I mustn't bother you! Some time when you're not too busy . . . I've only just heard that Charlie came to see you yesterday. As he didn't wait, I suppose that *must* mean . . ."

Moyra stood up and pressed her mother-in-law into a chair.

"I'm afraid it will be a blow for you," she began, "but I don't think anything else was possible and I've honestly done my best . . ."

"I know you have!" Lady Rhayader covered her eyes for a moment. "I suppose I was expecting this. No, I've not been told anything, but I somehow *felt* . . . One does in this house, you know. It's because I feel there's something odd about the duke now . . ."

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She stood up without finishing her sentence and prepared to resume her unending rounds. As she moved to the door, there was a knock almost too faint to be heard; and a distant, sing-song voice enquired if any one was within. Arthur hurried across the room and lifted the latch, starting back in amazement when he found the duchess outside. In the two months that he had lived here, she had appeared in the chapel and banqueting-hall at fixed times, always leaning on her daughter-in-law's arm, always pathetically smiling, always silent. Presumably she was put to bed when dinner was over; and presumably she remained in bed till she was hunted out for her morning walk on the battlements. Thereafter she disappeared again; and he felt that nothing less than a disaster could have set her roaming the castle unattended.

A tiny voice whispered something which he could not hear; and Lady Rhayader took a sheet of note-paper and wrote an answer. It must have been lacking in reassurance, for the old lady's face puckered as though she were going to cry. More words were added; and the duchess pointed her stick interrogatively at Lord Gillingham and Arthur.

"I've said we'll help her to find him," Lady Rhayader explained. "If I take her back . . . ?"

5

Less than ninety seconds had been required, Arthur judged, to convert fear of a man into fear for a man. The reign of terror came to an end in the moment when word ran that something was amiss with him who had inspired and maintained it. As Moyra swiftly and

silently issued candlesticks and matches, it was hard to remember that she had jested rather unconvincingly ten minutes before on her reluctance to play Amy Robsart, harder still to forget how coolly they had discussed whether or no the duke would survive this blow to his authority. Was it habit that sent them scurrying to the old man's succour? Were they moved by all-forgiving compassion for the frailty of extreme age? Or had their old fear dressed itself up in a new guise? If Lady Rhayader had burst in to say that her demented husband was running amok, they would in much the same way hurry to his rescue or their own.

As Moyra led the way downstairs, Arthur tried to recall the phrase which some one had just used about knowing things in this house without being told. A wordless alarm seemed to have been broadcast, reaching all parts of the castle simultaneously and bringing—as quickly as their feet would carry them—first Lord Gillingham, then Lady Rhayader and finally this deaf, ghostly little duchess, to make articulate each one's private premonition of catastrophe. As they hurried past the schoolroom, Moulton and Eddie were standing, scared, in the doorway; and the long corridor that separated the Knightons' tower from the duke's apartments had filled with a whispering rabble of housemaids, who sheltered behind the burly figures of the watchmen as the growing search-party swept by. Their behaviour, Arthur felt, was like that of animals in anticipation of an earthquake; and, though he tried to keep up his own courage by belittling theirs, he had caught their panic. And yet there was no justification for it! A dozen times a day, in a place this size, there must have been moments when no one knew whether the duke was in his own

rooms or in the library or in his office. Again and again his secretary and valet must have been asked—vainly—whether they had seen anything of him. It was unnecessary to assume that anything untoward must have befallen him.

Or should one not rather say that it had been unnecessary until this moment? Without trying to be wise after the event, Arthur had felt that something was ending as the dejected solicitor made his half-hearted plea for delay. Was it the old man's resistance? Ignored at the time, there had been a hint that he was "breaking up visibly". As the door shut, still more as Moyra retracted her bitter phrase that the duke might at least try to die more decently than he had lived, they were both feeling that something had snapped; and, when Lord Gillingham joined them, Arthur now knew that he had expected to be told what it was. Then the others had come, driven by their own premonitions.

"We'll start with the long gallery and work east and west," Moyra decreed. "If you'll stay here, father, we can come back and report to you. Arthur, you must write down each room as we go. There are parts of the castle I haven't been into for ten years. Parts I've never been into, if it comes to that, and parts I'm not going into now."

Arthur did not need to be told that she was thinking of the Bluebeard's chamber in which Lord Rhayader crooned and dribbled out his days. By now the memory of the bald, fat man in the wheeled chair had lost its power to frighten or horrify. Its place had been taken by the picture of a tiny old man, like an ivory Chinese grotesque, shuffling unseen through shadowy passages and up silent stairs, watching, listening, malevolently smiling;

a figure that might even now be peering at them through an invisible spy-hole.

"Does any one know the private staircases and passages?," Arthur enquired. "We must look there, if we don't find him anywhere else."

"I'll send for the house-carpenter." Moyra went back to her father and whispered a message. "You think . . . ?"

"I don't know *what* I think," Arthur made haste to answer. "He's a very old man. If he's been taken faint . . . Struggling with some door he can't open . . ."

"We must find him," said Moyra between clenched teeth.

Though his heart was no longer in the search, Arthur trudged obediently from library to chapel and from banqueting-hall to billiard-room. As they walked without speaking through dark, empty spaces which Arthur knew beforehand would be empty, he began to understand why he had suddenly stopped short a moment before. What he had in mind was not so much horrible as fantastic. If the old man had crawled away to hide his defeat; if they found him in some hidden passage, like a poisoned rat in a hole, this man who had been nicknamed "cast-iron" and who had to break because he could not bend . . .

"That pretty well exhausts the ground floor," said Arthur, as they returned to Lord Gillingham.

"Except the museum. We must find him," Moyra repeated.

Arthur checked to observe the whispering clusters dotted about the long gallery. A grave-faced house-keeper was moving from one to another, questioning and exhorting, but the servants at least had made up

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their minds and one or two were working themselves up to tears.

“Do you believe,” he asked, “what, obviously, all the others believe: that he’s dead?”

Moyra flung open the door of the museum and lifted her candlestick above her head.

“I suppose I do,” she answered slowly. “But I shall never be convinced till I’ve actually seen him. I used to think he would never die, I half think that still. Whatever happens, we must find him! If he gave us the slip now, he would become a sort of Wandering Jew to me, going on for ever . . .”

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORY IN THE MAKING

I

By seven o'clock Lord Gillingham, directing operations from the long gallery, announced that the various search-parties had now accounted for every room in the castle. The garden and stable staff had been interrogated by the duke's secretary; and the groom of the chambers, at the end of an hour's work with magnifying-glass and lantern, reported that among all the recent foot-prints by any of the doors there were none that could be ascribed to the missing man.

"If you would care for me to examine the windows now, my lord?," he suggested. "It's only a short drop to the moat . . ."

"And the battlements would be an admirable taking-off place if he *should* have been carried aloft in a fiery chariot," Lord Gillingham rejoined with a touch of impatience. "There's scriptural authority for such a thing, but I shan't fall back on that hypothesis till I've exhausted the more probable ones."

"Hadn't we better try the private passages?," asked Arthur. "Lady Rhayader told me there was a perfect network. I'll explore if any one will shew me how to get in. You were sending for the house-carpenter," he reminded Moyra.

"I'm afraid he can't help," she answered. "There's been no work done on them since he's been here. My mother-in-law can only remember a door in the armoury that has since been bricked up."

"Then let's start again from the place where the duke was last known to have been," Arthur proposed. "The justice-room."

Irresolutely and in default of a better suggestion, they made their way downstairs and explored the scene of their meeting that afternoon. Tempers were shortening under the strain of prolonged failure; and Arthur at least could not escape the feeling that the old man was mocking them in the monstrous game of hide-and-seek which he had forced them to play and that it was a point to him whenever they lowered their voices or glanced over their shoulders to see if he was watching them.

He felt too, as never before, that he was assisting at the birth of a legend. When the name of Moulton Castle was mentioned, the curious would now ask whether it was not haunted. They would be told that "the mad duke", who had vanished without a trace, was supposed to wander eternally—had he not bartered his soul for immortality?—along secret passages and up hidden stairways, appearing for an instant in a doorway or peeping malignantly round a corner. The familiar story of his last hours would be retold with ever-growing richness of embroidery: there would be a quarrel, a curse, a fruitless search, oblivion. And then he would return and re-establish his empire. . . .

"I suggest we might have some dinner after this," Arthur proposed to Moyra. "We're all becoming rather jumpy . . ."

"It'll certainly give the servants something to do," she

answered. "If they'd stop *chattering* . . .," she continued irritably.

Every one was becoming too free with advice and assuring every one else that it was no good looking here or there. A growing party of whisperers under the leadership of the scared chaplain was reiterating that the police should be informed.

"We *must* find him," Moyra declared again. "There's nothing the police can do. Come along! Even if he's not here, there may be something to *shew* . . ."

Nothing, apparently, had been touched in the justice-room. The duke's chair was still at the angle to which he had turned it as he drummed on the arm and waited impatiently for Moyra to exhaust herself. The table at which he had been sitting was still covered with neat piles of papers. And, resting against the ink-stand, Arthur saw the now familiar file with his own old letter at the top.

"No trace of him here," he was compelled to admit.

"Except this!," cried Moyra, picking up a long ebony cane from the floor. "He never walked *very* far without a stick."

The discovery put new life into the search; and Lord Gillingham tried the handles of two steel doors screened by curtains.

"The strong-rooms have all been examined, haven't they?," he asked. "I don't know whether it's worth looking into these cupboards . . ."

Opening the first at random, he exposed a stack of stationery. The next revealed a set of shelves packed with bound volumes of the *Country Gentleman's Magazine*. There was hardly room for a mouse to hide; and he was shutting the door when Moyra, with

the automatic movement of a book-lover, put out her hand to a volume with a torn back, standing upside down. Book and cover remained immovable under her fingers; and she called out for Arthur to bring a light nearer.

"Dummies! If this doesn't conceal something . . .," he muttered. "Ah!"

Pressing first on one side and then on the other, he could feel the false front moving under his hands. Inch by inch, the right half swung, on a pivot, into the room; the left disappeared into a dark slit, eighteen inches wide, cut in the solid masonry and ending, three feet away, in a flight of steps. A current of cold air flattened the flames of the exploring candles; and with a faint click the door fastened itself open on an invisible catch.

Involuntarily, all three fell back a pace, as though they had forced by accident the gate of an animal's cage. All three raked the darkness with their eyes. All three waited.

Arthur was the first to move.

"If I may have the lantern . . .," he said.

Though he tried to speak without concern, his heart was hammering so violently that he seemed to be shaken by every beat. It was a pretty confession for a healthy young man, a county cricketer, to make, but the prospect of tracking the old duke, like a wounded beast, single-handed into his lair was so unnerving that, if he did not start at once, he doubted if he would have the courage to go at all. So narrow was the passage that he would only be able to walk sideways; and his imagination conjured up pictures of weighty stone blocks that would shut him into an everlasting tomb, or stairs that ended without warning at the mouth of a pit.

"You're not going alone!," said Moyra, with a sharpness that shewed she had caught his own fear.

"I can't very well ask one of the servants to go where I'm afraid to go myself," Arthur replied.

Lord Gillingham, if his nerves were affected, at least contrived to appear calm.

"We may want help," he reminded Arthur. "Some one must go first; and you may have that honour if you like. Meanwhile . . ."

He hurried upstairs and returned with a couple of footmen. The fact that they too were obviously frightened and would require leadership rallied Arthur; and he was able to make a joke about King Minos and his labyrinth as he fastened a ball of string to the handle of the cupboard.

"We'll give you ten minutes," said Moyra, looking at her watch.

"If it's anything like the bee-hive Lady Rhayader led me to expect," Arthur replied, "it will take us two hours at least. I believe you can walk from one end of the castle to the other without shewing up. Let me just get my bearings! If we go straight ahead, we shall be under the museum. After that, comes the great hall with the courtyard to our left and the gate-house again to our left beyond the courtyard. The other side of the hall is the chapel, with the banqueting-hall beyond . . . Well, come along and don't trip over the string."



Holding his lantern at arm's length, Arthur moved sideways between the dank walls and up a short flight of

steps to a landing from which three passages separated right, left and centre. With his fingers cautiously paying out the string, he edged ahead until a spear of light pierced the masonry and he could look through a funnelled opening into a long, vaulted room set with trestle-tables.

"I don't know this," he murmured. "Can you help, James?"

The first of the footmen applied his eye to the hole.

"Our dining-room, sir," he answered. "We're . . . well, we're *in* the wall, sir. It's the museum up above."

"The next should be the steward's room, sir," said the second footman.

Arthur sidled to the next spy-hole, then passed on to a second junction.

"It must be the hall to our right," he reckoned. "The passage straight on will take us by the chapel. To the left? I don't quite understand that! If we turn left, we must fetch up against the outside wall of the castle."

"The gate-house first, sir," James corrected him.

"Ah, yes!"

Arthur hesitated before turning to the left. Even by daylight, accompanied by Lady Rhayader to the door of her studio, he felt a shrinking distaste for all this part of the castle. For anything he knew, this narrow slit of a passage might widen into a corridor broad enough for an idiot's keeper to wheel his chair from the prison to the prison yard. It was tempting to go straight on or to turn right, but by now Arthur was beginning to grasp the geography of the maze and could not pretend to have missed his way. Not an inch must be left unexplored! The course they were taking ran parallel with the chain of rooms, east and west, on the north side of the castle.

They were six feet below the ceiling level of the first basement and could look down into room after room, as though from the spectators' seats in a racquet-court. Presumably the tiny spiral staircases which they passed at intervals led to a corresponding series of passages on the floor above, whence further staircases would lead to further passages commanding the long gallery and the library. Branching from there at the extreme corners of the castle must be yet more staircases leading through the walls of the towers.

How the Plantagenet architects and builders must have enjoyed themselves, Arthur reflected, in devising this gigantic conjuror's trick! What sinister lights this castle-within-a-castle shed on the perils of those troublous times! And how the little duke must have hugged himself as he flitted from corner to corner, watching and listening! By now, Arthur found, his fears were being driven away by his excitement; and, when the last of the string ran out between his fingers, he threw down the end and increased his pace till he narrowly escaped plunging headlong down a sudden flight of steps.

"What are we getting to here?," he asked.

The second footman explored the wall for a loophole and drew back, blinking.

"Like cold water in your eyes!," he exclaimed. "That must be the courtyard, sir, and I reckon it's freezing outside."

"Then these steps must lead *under* the gate-house," said Arthur. "Is that the armoury, Martin?"

"Oh, no, sir! The armoury's the other side. I don't rightly know what is under the gate-house. Do you, Jem?"

"Can't say I do," James answered.

The voices of both men were uneasy; and Arthur descended the steps before they could begin to work on each other's fears. At the bottom of the stairs the passage turned at right-angles; and he stumbled and clutched at his neighbour as the now familiar support of the wall was abruptly withdrawn from his back. Turning, he found that the passage had ended in a room; and, lifting his lantern above his head, he could see a vaulted ceiling supported by pillars and a single window almost buried under its grill of rusty bars.

"Originally a dungeon, I suppose," he muttered. At his back, where he had nearly fallen, a massive iron door had been lifted from its hinges and was leaning against the wall. "Now a lumber-room, apparently . . ."

He was conscious of relief as he spoke. For a moment their proximity to the gate-house had inspired the ghastly suspicion that this was the tomb in which the unhappy Lord Rhayader was consigned to his living death. As, however, their eyes became accustomed to this startling spaciousness after the narrow passage through which they had groped their way for half the length of the castle, they could see piled packing-cases, broken furniture, a mound of papers and, beyond it, a black opening in the wall to correspond with the slit by which they had entered.

"Straight ahead. Sharp right. Up the stairs. Sharp left. And then we ought to be against the chapel," Arthur calculated. "After that the banqueting-hall . . . Come on!"

He took a step forward and tripped over something dark and yielding at his feet. The lantern fell from his fingers to shiver in pieces on the stone floor; and, as he scrambled frantically away from the unseen obstacle, his open hand pressed on two open eyes.

"Stay where you are and strike a match!" he screamed. "A match, you fool! Don't you hear?"

The note of panic in his own voice shamed him into some kind of self-control; and, as the others whinnied like horses trapped by fire, he forced himself to add:

"It's all right! I've a box of my own somewhere. Keep cool!"

Three flares of light sprang up simultaneously; and Arthur bent over the shadow of deeper black that lay in the black dust of the stone floor. Then he took a candle from his pocket and covered the white face with a handkerchief.

"His grace!" whispered one terror-stricken voice.

"Is he dead, sir?," asked another. "Dr. Swinburne's still here, I think."

"I should say he's been dead some hours," Arthur replied. "No, there's nothing a doctor can do." He took the dead man's watch from his waistcoat pocket. The glass was broken; and the hands stood at a quarter past five. "If you two can find your way back, will you tell Lord Gillingham what has happened? He must break the news to her grace. . . . And then if you can find something to act as a stretcher . . . See that Lord Moulton and Master Eddie are out of the way. I'll stay here."

3

Without giving him time to reconsider his orders, the two men hurried back the way they had come; and Arthur sat down on a packing-case to reconstruct the scene of three hours before. There was no mark of injury on the

dead man: he had collapsed in a clean fall and the side of his head was not cut or bruised where it had met the floor. Why, though, was he here at all? Had he felt his end approaching? Had he staggered or crept away to die?

No other explanation accounted for his presence in this outlying part of the castle. He had hurried from the justice-room without taking his almost inseparable cane.

"Good God, he never even took a lamp!," Arthur whispered in amazement.

Scrambling down from his packing-case, he swept the floor with slow swathes of light from his guttering candle. The broken remains of a lantern, still hot to the touch, were piled against one of the pillars; but of torch, taper or match to light the dying man to his tomb there was no sign. No doubt he knew his way blindfold, but he should not—in common decency—have scurried here in the dark like a rat behind wainscoting. To the last he had contrived to make himself less than human.

Arthur straightened his back and walked to the crazy rick of broken furniture and empty boxes. His nostrils, hitherto soured by age-old dust and damp, were being faintly tickled by a smell of burning paper; and, as he explored the stacked rubbish with his foot, a wavering spiral of acrid smoke rose and vanished.

"Just as well one of us stayed here," he muttered, opening himself a way into the jungle of legless chairs and stamping on the smouldering papers.

His eye was caught by a gleam of polished metal; and he dug with his toe into the heaped litter until he had uncovered a silver candlestick. So the old man had, after all, brought a light with him! It was difficult to understand how it had fallen so far from the body. If

it had been flung away in a dying spasm of pain, surely the flame would have been extinguished.

For the first time Arthur tried to picture the duke's attitude before he collapsed. Though he had fallen backwards, his feet were turned towards the passage through which the search-party had come; and, unless he had twisted round as he fell, he must have been coming away.

"After leaving the candle planted there, burning . . . There's only one explanation of *that*. And yet he might have *known* that nothing less than dynamite could have any effect on these walls and floors! And just under his own son's rooms . . ."

It was idle, though, for a sane man to argue what a madman should have known. Moyra, it appeared now, had understood their antagonist better than he had. When she disclaimed any desire for the fate of Amy Robsart, it had really seemed necessary to protest that the duke, for all his passionate wilfulness, would stop short of murder; but, unless one denied the testimony of one's own eyes, he had perished in a crazy attempt to bring the house down in ruins on all their heads.

Arthur laid the candlestick, artfully overturned, beside the tiny, huddled figure and returned to his seat. Within the next few minutes he must decide how much should be told to the family; and an irrational surge of pity drowned the relief, the thankfulness, even the anger which he was expecting to feel. This puny creature attacking the mountainous solidity of the castle with a handful of damp paper was like a child battering at a forest tree with a wooden axe. Like a passionate child, he had lost sight of reality. And he must have acquired something of a frenzied child's unnatural strength to have built this pyre.

Was it conceivable that he had made it for himself? And had sanity returned when he saw what he had done?

Within the next few hours the family must decide how much to tell the world. By this time to-morrow the newsbills would all be proclaiming *Death of A Duke*. Hurried readers in streets and trains would look at the headlines and say: "*Leominster? I thought he'd died years ago*"; or, if they were under forty: "*Leominster? Never heard of him!*" The middle-aged racing man would recall that the Duke of Leominster's Paladin II had won the Saint Leger in the nineties; and an elderly fox-hunter might actually remember the days when the Duke of Leominster's hounds were hunted by the duke himself. With that, the hurried reader would pass on to the next column; and all unconsciously, Arthur felt, he would have put the old man in his proper perspective.

"When you stand back," he muttered, "to look at something you've been watching through a microscope . . ."

To the surviving actors, the curtain was falling on the last act of something that had begun three months earlier as an acid social comedy and had changed to crude and incredible melodrama; but to the audience—his own relations at Leamington, for example—the little that Arthur was prepared to tell would not contain the material of a curtain-raiser. Seen in the perspective that the world outside Moulton would think proper, the duke became merely an obstinate old man like any other, Knighton a weak-willed young man and Moyra a young woman—at loggerheads with both—for whom her husband's flight and his grandfather's death were the two best things that could have happened. If the whole truth were told, no one would believe it.

“Even if any one ever knew the whole truth about anything . . .”

He started at the clang of a bell somewhere above him. The news, then, had been broken; and they were already tolling for the dead. There could hardly have been time to warn the duchess; and apparently no one had thought to wait for the doctor's verdict. It almost seemed as if they wanted the countryside to know without delay, almost as if they were rejoicing openly. Were the whole truth ever told, something would have to be said about the odd note of jubilation which one listener fancied he could detect in the reverberation of a passing-bell. And perhaps it was not all fancy. When the two footmen returned, with Lord Gillingham and Dr. Swinburne, they approached their task with unexpected briskness, as though they wished to take their full share in a work of common deliverance. Only when they were required to lift the body on to a plank did they hesitate.

“There's a curious smell of burning,” the doctor commented with a sniff. “I should have a careful look-round before I came up . . .”

“I broke my lantern when I fell,” said Arthur. “However, we'll take no risks . . .”

He touched Lord Gillingham's arm and waited till the others had passed out of hearing. Then he replaced the candlestick in its bed of charred paper and pointed to the piled wreckage of broken furniture. There seemed no need for words; and his companion's only reply was to look up at the vaulted ceiling and shrug his shoulders.

By the time they reached the justice-room Dr. Swinburne had made his examination and the body of the duke was lying under a sheet on a make-shift bier. With the volubility of newly recovered courage, the footmen were

describing how they had found him, while the chaplain and the secretary explored the mechanism of the hidden door. No one, Arthur observed, would bring himself to ask why the old man had suddenly disappeared in the very stones of the castle. Even in death he retained enough authority to daunt an impertinent questioner. And, when Lord Gillingham enquired whether there would be an inquest, they all seemed tacitly to congratulate themselves on hearing that it was unnecessary.

"It's only what might have been expected," said the doctor. "I ordered him to bed a week ago . . ."

"Then, if he's collapsed from natural causes," said Lord Gillingham, "I suggest it would be kinder to let people think that he died in this room. You can understand," he continued to the footmen, "how painful it would be for members of the family if they knew that he had met his end as in fact you found him. By himself. In that strange place. You see that, Martin?"

"Oh, yes, my lord!"

"And you, James? We can rely on your discretion? Thank you! No objection to that, doctor? Good!" He unlocked the door and stood with his fingers on the handle while the others filed out. "Heart-failure, I suppose, is what Swinburne will put on the certificate," he murmured to Arthur. "That was only the immediate cause. What really killed him, Camelford, was what kept him alive so long: megalomania."

As they came into the hall, Moyra handed a sheaf of telegrams to one servant and told another to have sand-

wiches brought to the long gallery. A third was sent to fetch her a *Peerage* from the library, while yet another was despatched upstairs to warn the duchess that the doctor was now on his way to her.

"Lady Rhayader has put me in charge of everything," she explained briefly. "The old lady's very bad. Before you go up, Dr. Swinburne, will you throw your eye over this? We shall be besieged by reporters to-morrow; and I've been trying to prepare a statement. Nobody seems to know exactly how old the duke was. I suppose we shall find it in *Burke* . . ."

The doctor took the paper which she was holding out to him and read it in an undertone, interrupting himself defensively at every phrase that gave him an opportunity to justify his handling of an impossible patient.

"'Feverish chill'," he murmured. "If only he hadn't gone to Brampton . . . 'Confined to his room . . .' Certainly he had no business to come back so soon. It's no good saying that now . . . 'Apparently normal health and spirits . . .' Yes, but it doesn't require much to carry off people of his age . . . 'Sudden collapse . . .'"

"You think this will do?," asked Moyra.

"First rate, first rate!"

Only pausing to add a date from the *Peerage*, she led the way to the gallery and passed the draft to her father.

"'He is succeeded'," Lord Gillingham read, "'by his son the Marquis of Rhayader, who was born in 1869 and married, in 1895, the Hon. Ruth Caroline, second daughter of the sixth Baron Lechlade. The new duke, who met with an accident in the hunting-field several years ago, has been prevented from playing an active part in public life.' Poor devil! And yet he seems happy

in that queer, unimaginable world of his. It's the others one ought to pity. . . . Well, I've no fault to find with this, my dear."

"There's not an untrue word in it," said Moyra with an acid smile. "He *did* fall off his horse once when he was drunk."

"Still . . . In a lapidary inscription a man is not on oath; and I don't know that we need squander truth on a public that has no right to it. Camelford will agree with me there, I'm sure."

Arthur nodded absently and approached the great open fire where the duke had toasted himself night after night for a life-time, perhaps ever since he reluctantly abandoned the older, nobler tradition of drinking himself under the table and sleeping there till he was sorted out from his cronies and carried to bed. The "truth", was some one saying? When the obituary-writers had exhausted their commonplaces on "the passing of a unique figure" whose like they would not see again, the scissors-and-paste biographers would set themselves to collect the legends that were still preserved in distant taverns and old men's clubs. A forgotten Duke of Leominster would emerge from their researches; and for a few months a few score people would boast that they had seen, maybe shaken hands with, a man who had fought a duel with an injured husband and had paid forty thousand pounds in damages for libelling a trainer. The evidence of this spirited manhood was wholly lacking in the light, crumpled figure which Arthur had helped to lift. There were, indeed, as many dukes as there were writers to describe them; and all were equally like the original.

Arthur shivered and held his hands to the fire. The chill of those dank passages had penetrated to his bones;

and his clothes were steaming where they had swept the dripping walls.

"I was thinking, when I was alone with him downstairs . . .," he began. "If all history is as little like the truth, Moyra, as this . . ."

"This is how history is usually made!," Lord Gillingham replied. "Truth is so much stranger than fiction that even your novelists confine themselves to what they think the public will swallow. You don't mention that the new duke has a son . . .," he pointed out to Moyra.

She shook her head and drew up a chair as Lady Rhayader came into the room.

"Charlie and I are very little known. And I see no point of reminding people of my existence. If we *can* get the divorce through quietly . . . We felt we couldn't face dinner," she explained to her mother-in-law, "so I had some food sent here. Is the duchess . . . ?" She checked and passed her hand over her eyes. "I suppose *you're* duchess now! And I . . . Just for to-night let's go on as we were!"

Lady Rhayader sat down and allowed Arthur to pour her a glass of wine.

"Dr. Swinburne's with her now," she answered. "I'm afraid, very much afraid . . . She lived for him; and now that his support is taken away . . . Moyra my dear, we shall have to begin thinking about the future. If, as I fear . . ."

"We shall do everything we can for you," Lord Gillingham put in.

"But I can never look after this place by myself. Even if I could . . . I'm so *tired*, Moyra. If only we could get away to a tiny house somewhere in the

sun . . . The proper person here, I know, is Charlie, but he has such a hatred of the place . . .”

Arthur turned to study Moyra's face. Her own experience of Moulton Castle could hardly have endeared it to her; but, unlike Lady Rhayader and the old duchess, unlike Knighton and his father, she had refused to be subdued by it. Her eyes, meeting his, invited him to remember her saying, only that afternoon, that she would rule here as regent, but even she could not have expected to be offered her regency so soon.

“It would make the duke turn in his grave,” she answered, “if he knew that I was reigning in his stead!”

“I'm too old and stupid to undertake it myself,” sighed Lady Rhayader. “Unless somebody young and capable will come forward, I don't know what state things will be in when poor little Moulton's time comes. The duke kept everything in his own hands so much . . .”

“I suppose he imagined he was going on for ever . . .”

Lady Rhayader glanced timorously over her shoulder as though she feared that the old man would rise at such a challenge. For her at least he would live on, though a bell was tolling for him at this moment.

“He must have known that this was what *would* happen,” she answered. “Your will was always so much stronger than Charlie's. No, he certainly didn't think he was going on for ever. That's why he wanted you and the boys to grow up in the *atmosphere* of this place . . .”

Moyra shuddered involuntarily and walked to a window overlooking the courtyard. The wind must have shifted in the last few minutes, for the great bell could no longer be heard. Opening the window, she stood listening and only returned to her seat when a mournful clang echoed

faintly through the night, bearing the dead man's spirit a stage farther on its last journey.

"Once I'd produced an heir, he never bothered about me," she answered, "until I shewed that his horrible 'atmosphere' was stifling me. Then he tried to get rid of me! If he could have kept Charlie, kept Moulton and turned me out! Instead of which . . ." Moyra paused abruptly and looked round as though she were surveying the kingdom that was being pressed upon her. "When he failed, I suppose he *did* see I was the only alternative. It was quite enough to kill him, but I wonder he didn't cut all our throats in our sleep! If he can see what's happening now . . ."

Lady Rhayader started superstitiously and laid her hand on Moyra's wrist:

"He's dead! And you're the only person who can lift his burden. Of course I don't expect you to give me an answer at once . . ."

In the silence that followed, the tolling of the great bell forced itself again on Arthur's consciousness and he looked at his watch, wondering whether it would continue all night. By now the news must be well on its way to London; and within the next hour half a hundred flurried sub-editors would be searching their obituary files and changing the make-up of their principal news-page to admit one more item before their country editions went to press. Those readers who knew Moulton Castle or knew of Lord Rhayader as an invalid would be asking themselves who would administer the estate in his place. They would think of Knighton; and then very soon they would hear that Knighton was being divorced.

A footman came in with a message from the doctor; and Lady Rhayader hurried from the room.

"I was afraid," Moyra confessed, "she was going to ask if I didn't see that the duke's death had changed everything. With Charlie, I mean."

"You may have to allow a certain interval . . .," Lord Gillingham hinted.

"Is that necessary? Whatever we do, people will say that we were only waiting for the old man to die and that, if he'd lived, he would never have allowed us to break apart. It's quite untrue . . ."

"But that's how history is made." Lord Gillingham moved to the door. "I'll see if any help's wanted. You stay here, my dear: you're worn out."

Moyra stared sombrely at the fire and then roused with an effort to ring for the table to be cleared.

"The only difference his death makes is that I may be spared a little mud-throwing. I can't think he would have lain down under an undefended action." She turned to Arthur with a weary smile. "History, I'm afraid, would then have said that I'd taken advantage of my husband's absence to have an affair with my sons' tutor. That is, in fact, what the old man told Charlie, who—with all his faults—was gentleman enough to call it a foul lie. If you want to create a prejudice, you can't be too careful in your choice of phrase," she continued reflectively. "'Her sons' tutor' . . ."

"And you say 'having an affair' instead of 'falling in love'," Arthur put in.

"But of course! It makes the relationship so much

more casual, furtive, essentially physical. . . . However, we needn't trouble about that now. I'm thinking of the future. You can see the fate which my mother-in-law is contriving for me, Arthur. I can't very well escape it. For Moulton's sake. But it's not a woman's job. Are you prepared to help? If Charlie could learn the business, you can."

"I'll do whatever you want! At present I'm feeling stunned . . ."

"I too. Perhaps it's a good thing. We can look ahead dispassionately. In twelve months' time all this sordid business will be over. You'll have had time to think . . ."

"We both shall. You don't mean that I'm not to see you till then? I couldn't stand that! "

"Are you afraid I might forget all about you? I shan't. But I don't want you to be disappointed. When you feel a hundred, as I do now, there's so little you can give . . ."

"Do you call yourself 'so little'? "

"I do indeed, even if so much hadn't been given away already! Arthur, I know you're devoted to Moulton and Eddie. Can you be sure that you'll never be jealous of them? They've been everything to me for so long! "

"But they've not been able to give you quite all you expect of life."

"No, I want somebody I can love," she whispered, "somebody who'll love me. Thank God we *have* to wait a little time, my dear! I'm tired, tired to death. When I've had time to rest, time to *forget*, Arthur . . . Have you ever thought what it must be for a woman to live with a man she doesn't love and bear him children? It's bad enough while she still doesn't know what love is

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and all she's missing. When once she finds out . . . D'you remember the afternoon I came to see you at Brampton? I think it must have been then. I felt I'd been *cheated!* "

Arthur sat down on the arm of her chair and took her two hands between his own.

" I *believe* I fell in love with you that first night here," he told her. " Certainly I swore I wouldn't come back here! "

" I don't know what I should have done if you'd refused! I suppose I persuaded other people that I was bringing you here for the sake of the boys . . . "

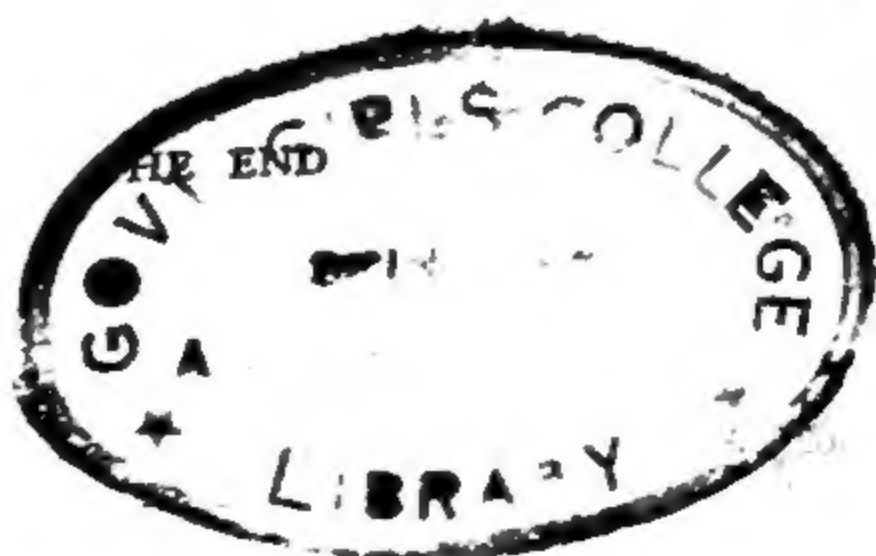
" And I suppose I persuaded people it was for their sake I was coming! I certainly did my best. Whether they *believed* me . . . They certainly won't in twelve months' time."

Moyra frowned and turned impatiently to the fire. What people would say in a year's time was very unimportant.

" ' *They say. What say they? Let them say!* '," she quoted.

" They'll say your husband was stolen from you," Arthur predicted, " and that you retaliated by marrying ' the tutor '. They'll never guess the truth: that belongs to us."

" And that," said Moyra, " is the way history's made."



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